

At Home with the Breath

February 8, 2014

We're here because we want to find well-being inside, and there are many levels to that well-being. You could start with the thoughts we had just now about goodwill, compassion, empathetic joy, and equanimity. These are thoughts that induce a sense of well-being.

You remind yourself that you do wish other beings well. Your goodwill may not be totally universal yet, but you can work on that. The extent to which you can feel compassion for people who are suffering and empathetic joy for people who are happy or creating the causes for happiness: Those are good feelings to engender inside. It feels good to think these things. Thoughts of equanimity, when you realize there are certain things that are beyond your control and you accept that so you can focus on what you *can* change, what you can control: Thinking about that can often lift a lot of burdens off your mind.

That's one level of well-being. The next takes more work, which is to get the mind really to settle down and be at ease with one object: the breath. Think of the breath as the energy flowing through the body that helps the air come in and out of the lungs. And you can look at that flow of energy anywhere in the body. Take a couple of good, long, deep in-and-out breaths and notice: Where do you feel that energy flow most prominently? Focus there. And then ask yourself if it feels good.

If the way you're breathing right now doesn't feel good, you can change it. Make it longer, shorter, or in-long out-short, in-short out-long, fast, slow, heavy or light. There are lots of ways you can adjust your breathing. Try different ones for a while and see which ones seem to have the best effect, are easiest to stay with, and actually feel really good.

Notice that some areas of the body are more sensitive to the flow of breath energy than the others. For some people, the most sensitive spot is in the area around the heart. For others, it's in the area in the neck or the muscles of the face. There are lots of different places where you might be especially sensitive. Try to focus on an area that *is* very sensitive, where you really feel well nourished, by allowing the flow of energy to be just right—not too long, not too short—like the porridge in the story of Goldilocks.

And you get to choose what's just right for you. This will require that you be observant, because what may feel good for a couple of breaths may not be so good if you keep it up for a long time. So if one way of breathing doesn't feel good

anymore, you stop and change. Try to stay on top of the process. And if you find that the sense of energy flowing through the body feels a little coarse, well, okay, think of everything being full so there's less and less of a need to pull the energy in or push it out.

A lot of that has to do with our cartoon ideas of what happens when we breathe. We have an image of how it should feel, and so we try to make it feel that way. But if you think of all the different breath energy channels in the body getting connected so that as soon as the breath comes in, the whole body is flooded with comfortable energy, then you find the breath gets more and more calm. At the same time, it's refreshing. You're not starving yourself of breath energy. You don't want to squeeze it to make it calm. Just allow it to be full, and as you develop that sense of fullness, the breath gets calm on its own.

What you're doing is creating something that the Buddha calls a home for the mind. It's a place where you can dwell. This is what the mind needs for a sense of well-being. Otherwise, it never feels at home. Every place is a strange place, and every place is unsatisfactory. You move from one place to the next to the next to the next, constantly on the move, and there's no real satisfaction in all that moving around.

You want to be able to settle in because you can develop a sense of well-being when you can settle in this way. And it allows you to observe your mind more carefully, because there are still deeper levels of calm, deeper levels of well-being that come not just with getting the mind still, but with understanding what the mind is doing.

This is why the Buddha's central teaching is on kamma. It's what we do that influences the extent to which we find well-being or not. And the word "doing" here includes not only physical actions, but also words you speak and thoughts you think. In particular, you want to see which thoughts you're thinking that are adding a lot of unnecessary stress and unnecessary burdens to the mind. By getting the mind still with a sense of well-being, you get more sensitive to this, both because the stillness puts you in a position where you can see little movements and because your sense of well-being, as it gets greater, gets you more sensitive to subtle levels of *not* well-being that you used to take for granted. It's only when you sense them clearly that you can let them go.

Having a dwelling place like this also gives you a sense of security so that if you're looking at the mind's unskillful habits, you don't feel so defensive about them. It's like a person who's hungry as opposed to a person who's well-fed. The person who's hungry, if you start criticizing him, is not going to want to hear it.

But if someone is well-fed, rested, and in a good mood, you can talk about that person's failings, and the person will be a lot more likely to listen.

It's the same with the mind. When you get the mind nourished and soothed, massaged by the breath, it's going to have enough sense of self-confidence, self-esteem, and well-being that it's going to be willing to admit, "Oh, yes, I do have that other habit." But because you're learning this new habit in the mind, you're in a better position to let go of that bad habit—not out of hatred or aversion, but simply because you realize it doesn't serve any purpose.

The sense of well-being you can develop with the breath—by working, adjusting, and then maintaining whatever good breathing habits you can develop—not only provides a sense of immediate well-being right now but it also enables the mind to dig down deeper and deeper. You see things more clearly and gain an even greater sense of well-being that comes from learning how to let go of all the ways in which the mind creates unnecessary stress for itself—even subtle things that most people take for granted.

So work on this sense of well-being. If part of the mind asks, "Isn't this an attachment?" well, it's a good attachment because it enables you to make real changes in the mind. The mind is always going to be holding onto something until the very last moment before awakening. And the whole strategy of the path is to give you good things to hold onto, good habits to develop, to replace your unskillful ones, step by step. The deepest well-being in the mind doesn't have any habits. It doesn't require actions at all; it's just there. But to get there requires action. It requires that you develop good habits.

So you've got a whole hour. See how well you can familiarize yourself with the breath. Make it into a dwelling place, a place where the mind feels at home.