

In Charge of Your Moods

March 6, 2022

Okay, close your eyes and take a couple of good, long, deep in-and-out breaths. Where do you feel the breathing in your body? Especially when the breath is long, you feel it down in the chest, in the torso, in the stomach... but wherever it's clearest, focus your attention right there.

Then ask yourself if long breathing is comfortable. If it feels good, keep it up. If it doesn't feel good, you can change. You can try shorter breathing, or in short out long, in long out short, fast, slow, heavy, light, deep, shallow.

See what kind of breathing feels best for you right now. If you find a rhythm that feels good, stick with it. If after a while it doesn't feel so good anymore, you can change.

Allow the mind to settle down with the breath. It doesn't have to think about anything else. If other thoughts do come into the mind, you can ignore them. They can come and they can also go. You don't have to follow them. You don't have to welcome them in, and you don't have to follow them out.

Just think of your thoughts as being like clouds going across the sky: There's nothing to catch the clouds. You don't catch the thoughts, and you can stay right here.

If your mind is like sails on a sailboat, the breeze comes, the sails catch the breeze, and the boat goes wherever the breeze will take it. So, take down your sails. Let the wind blow right through—but you stay right here.

You're trying to develop a special quality of the mind: the mind when it's still, at ease, solidly here in the present moment. When it's here, it can observe itself. If you go running off after thoughts, you know about the thoughts, but you don't know about yourself.

Yet, as the Buddha says, it's because of the mind that there's suffering in the world—because of the way the mind processes things. Sometimes things can be perfectly fine outside, and yet the mind can use them to make itself miserable.

But it can also develop a skill: that no matter what things are like outside, it can be fine. What this skill requires, though, is that you develop your inner resources. The Buddha highlights three things inside that you can have some control over and that will determine whether you're going to suffer over things or not.

The first is the breath. We breathe every day, every day, and yet for the most part, we let the breath come in and out on its own. So we start breathing in ignorance, and that can lead to dis-ease in the body. You're not paying much attention to it, you start getting very tense, getting very tight, and then when the body feels tense and tight, the mind is put into a bad mood.

So, here's a really simple way of putting yourself back in a good mood: Learn how to breathe in a way that feels refreshing to the body. Think of the whole body breathing, because the breath isn't just the air coming in and out of the lungs. It's also the energy flowing through the blood vessels, through the nerves. And those vessels and nerves extend throughout the whole body: down to the tips of the fingers, down to the tips of the toes, in front, in back, all around. Think of every cell in your body breathing in, breathing out—with a sense of ease, a sense of well-being.

That's the first element. The Buddha calls these things *fabrications*, *saṅkhāra*. They're things that you can put together. You're not just stuck with the way they already are. They're potentials you can develop.

The next potential is *verbal fabrication*: the way you talk to yourself. Like right now: You're talking to yourself about the breath. If you find yourself talking about something else, bring your conversation back to the breath.

Ask yourself: How does the breath feel? Where do you feel it? Where do you not feel it? Where is it comfortable? Once it feels comfortable in one spot, try to protect that spot, so that it stays comfortable all the way in through the in-breath, all the way out through the out-breath, and in between.

You don't have to squeeze it to get the breath out. You don't have to pull on it to get the breath in. You don't have to pinch it to mark the boundary line between the in-breath and the out-breath. Just let everything flow, open and wide—easily.

So, talk to yourself about that. How do you do that?

Then, once you've got that sense of well-being continuous, think of it spreading. You can have a picture in your mind of where the body is right now, where the breath is flowing in the body, where it's flowing easily, and where it's not flowing easily.

This is getting us into the third fabrication, which the Buddha calls *mental fabrication*: basically, your perceptions and your feelings. Perceptions are the images or individual words that function as labels in the mind, saying that this is this, or that is that. With verbal fabrication, you're thinking in full sentences; with mental fabrication, the perceptions are just single words or images.

And then there are feelings: Here, we're trying to develop a feeling of ease in the body. Let it spread into the mind, so that the mind feels at ease as well.

And there you are. You've got the three things that go into affecting your emotions. The way you breathe—that's *bodily* fabrication. The way you talk to yourself—that's *verbal* fabrication. And then the perceptions and feelings—those are *mental* fabrications. When you're with the breath like this, it's very easy to see them all clearly.

Then, based on these three fabrications, we act. It's because we breathe that we can move the body. It's because we talk to ourselves that we can then speak in the world outside. And it's because we have perceptions and feelings that the mind can think. So, all of our actions come out of these three things.

Once you've got these three things clear in your mind, then you begin to notice how you use them to create not only a state of concentration, like you're trying to do right here, but also as you go through the day—how you create different emotions. When you realize that these are the building blocks, then if you find you're building an unskillful emotion, you can take it apart and build a new one with new blocks.

For example, when there's anger, you'll notice that you breathe in a certain way that's irritating. There can be a tightness in the body, a tightness in the stomach, a tightness in the chest—and you feel you've got to get it out of your system. But if you simply breathed in a better way, you wouldn't have that sense that you had to get it out, or that you were bottling it up.

Then you can look at the way you're talking to yourself about the situation: Why are you focusing on things that make you angry? Part of the mind will say, "There's something wrong here. Something has to be done to change it." Well, can you change it without getting angry? The problem with anger is it tends to blind you, but if you can clearly see a situation that's wrong, and you learn how *not* to be angry about it, then you're in a better position to see clearly what the most effective thing would be to do or to say to improve the situation.

Then, of course, there are the perceptions of the situation you hold in mind: What picture are you painting in your mind about the situation? How could you paint that picture in a different way—one that would be just as true, but wouldn't have to give rise to anger?

When you learn how to take apart an unskillful emotion like this, you can also learn how to put together some skillful ones, such as goodwill, as we were mentioning this morning. It's a lot easier to feel goodwill for others when you feel good inside.

So breathe in a way that feels good, and then talk to yourself about how important it is to have goodwill for everybody: that you're protecting yourself

from acting on ill will, which would lead to bad karma, and of course you're protecting the people around you.

Remind yourself of these things. Goodwill is for your own good. Remind yourself also what it means to have goodwill: wishing that other people will behave in a skillful way so that they'll be happy. Then you can start thinking, "What can I do, what can I say, how can I think in a way that would actually help those people in that direction?"

As for mental fabrication: You can have an image in the mind of goodwill spreading around. And it's not diminished. It's not like butter: The more you spread it around, the thinner, thinner, thinner it gets. Instead, it's like the light of candles: You can think of every person holding a candle, and your candle is lit. You light somebody else's, and then they can light somebody else's, and somebody else's. The fire gets spread around, but it doesn't get darker, doesn't get dim—in fact, it actually gets brighter the more it's spread.

In the same way, if you can have goodwill for everybody, it's better than just having goodwill for a few people. When you have no ill will for anyone at all, you can live in the world with a greater sense of ease, a greater sense of safety.

So it's useful to get to know your mind in terms of those three kinds of fabrication. First, the way you breathe, and how the way you breathe can affect your mood. Then second, the way you talk to yourself: the topics you choose to talk about and the things you choose to say. And then third: your perceptions and feelings. Here, of course, the feelings are related to the way you breathe, but also to the way you think. You breathe in such a way that gives rise to a sense of ease, but it requires some thinking to imagine how to spread that sense of ease around. You hold an image in mind of how the feeling of comfort can spread. You might think of energy channels in the body, or energy centers in the body. Think of them being wide open, filled with good energy.

By putting things together through these three kinds of fabrication, you're really changing the state of your mind. And keep that in mind, remember that, so that when you're in a *bad* mood, you can stop and ask yourself, "How can I change this mood from within?"

All too often when we're in a bad mood, we look for help outside. We want somebody else to put us in a good mood. Or we want to do something outside to put us in a good mood. But if our good mood depends on things outside, we're not safe. You want your good mood to depend on things inside you, skills that you develop inside. That way, you can go everywhere and not be a victim of bad moods—and not be a victim of the kind of karma that you tend to create when you're in a bad mood.

So get really familiar with these three kinds of fabrication. They're your inner resources, so that no matter how things go in the world outside, you still have resources inside that can create a state of well-being—a well-being that lasts.