

Delight in the Breath

October 15, 2022

We come into the meditation because we want a happiness that's reliable. We've looked at the happiness in the world outside, the pleasures of the world outside, and we see that they come and go. Most people just accept that that's the way things have to be.

But the Buddha didn't accept that. He said: What meaning is there in a life that looks for happiness in things that come and go? After all, *we* come and go. We're subject to aging, illness, and death. The things around us are subject to aging, illness, and death. What's accomplished if those are the things in which you look for happiness?

That's why he left home: to look for something more reliable. And he found it after a lot of trial and error. He never let himself get discouraged by the errors. He stuck with that conviction: There's got to be something that doesn't age, doesn't grow ill, doesn't die. He found it inside.

We're following his example. He's made a lot of the errors for us. Of course, we're still going to make errors ourselves, though. We listen to his teachings and can come up with all kinds of different interpretations that can really be far off the mark.

On top of that, our desires can go in ways that are counter to the Dhamma. They get everything all confused. Let's try to keep things simple. Just now we chanted the *Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta*, which is all about the four noble truths. It starts from a very basic question: Why is there pain? Why is there suffering? And is there a way to put an end to it? The Buddha explains why there's pain, and he also explains that, Yes, it is possible to put an end to it. Human beings can do this. That's why we're here.

A major part of the path is right concentration. It's ironic: In a lot of Western Dhamma circles in particular, people are warned off from concentration. They say, "Watch out. You're going to get stuck on concentration and you won't gain any insight." But as the Buddha said, if you're not stuck on concentration, you're going to go back and get stuck on sensuality: thoughts about how you can find pleasure in sights, sounds, smells, tastes, tactile sensations. And those are the precisely the things that he said are going to disappoint you.

Of all the different factors of the path, the very first one he encountered was right concentration. It starts with dropping your thoughts of sensuality, all your plans for the pleasures you can find outside. Focus on the breath inside. He says if

you can find a pleasure in here, then no matter how tempting the pleasures will be outside, you have something to counteract them from within. If you don't have this pleasure inside, he said, then no matter how clearly you see the drawbacks of sensuality, you're going to go back for it, because the mind needs pleasure. It needs a sense of well-being.

So let's try to provide it inside. As you're sensitive to the breath, what is there in the breath that's pleasurable? If you're not sure, hold your breath for a while until you can't hold it any longer, and then breathe in. The parts of the body that feel refreshed by the breath tell you that this is what the refreshment of the breath is like. Can you focus there?

You'll find that some parts of the body are more sensitive than others. So you focus attention there. Ask yourself: What would feel really good right here, right now? Even forget the idea that it's "breath." You say: "What would be a sensation in that part of the body that would feel good?" And the breath will provide it. When you drink it in—the word for rapture in Pali is related to drinking, as if you're getting a glass of water—it's as if you've been going across the desert and you're really thirsty, and then you can finally get a glass of water, and all the cells in your body seem to respond.

So have that kind of sensitivity to the way you breathe, because if you can't find pleasure here with the breath, you have to find some other concentration object with which to find pleasure. But it has to be *inside* in order to counteract the tendency for the mind to go out and look for pleasures *outside*. You're trying to change the balance of power here.

So breathe in a way that feels refreshing. Think of the different parts of the body that could be tense or tired, and breathe right into them. Give them whatever they need, so that the whole body feels satisfied. And of course, the mind will then feel satisfied, breathing in, breathing out.

Most of the pleasure of the breath comes with the in-breath. As for the out-breath, you can let it breathe out on its own. Think of the in-breath and the out-breath as being continuous. In other words, you don't have to create a sharp distinguishing line between them, because that would tend to tense things up, to block things a little bit. That's precisely what you *don't* need when you're trying to develop a sense of refreshment inside. Make it all one continuous breath.

When Ajaan Lee talks about the whole body feeling full, what would it be for the arm to feel full? What it would be for the legs to feel full? The potential is there. Often, our problem is that we don't even think of that potential. As a result, we don't get any use out of it. What would be a full feeling, say, in your legs? The blood fills the blood vessels. The blood fills the blood vessels in the arms, and all

over. How can you breathe in a way that allows for that all-over feeling to develop and stay steady? In the beginning, it'll be weak, but as you stick with it, it gets more intense.

What you're learning here is how to be a connoisseur of the breath. And it is part of the path. It's not the goal. So it requires that you take some delight in it. As with every pleasure, there's a certain amount of embroidery or commentary that goes along with the pleasure. We do this with sensory pleasures because they really need it. There are so many things that we like in life. We like them because we know how to talk ourselves into liking them even more than they really deserve: certain foods, certain places. We have lots of associations that go along with them. And the associations are what the Buddha means by "delight."

Now we have to learn to shift our allegiance. Learn how to delight in the breath. Really get engrossed in the breath, how it feels to be right here, right now, satisfying the breath-needs of the body. Use some ingenuity to get every part of the body well-nourished. Some parts of the body require that you breathe in from the back. Or if there's a tension, say, around the chest, breathe right into it. You don't have to pull the breath from any other part of the body.

We talked earlier today about provoking different elements or properties in the mind or in the body. We're really good at provoking some pretty unskillful ones—like sensuality. Here we're learning how to provoke the breath energy in the body in a way that's intriguing, satisfying. When you get a sense of how to make the breath energy really good in the body and learn how to appreciate it, that becomes your defense against a lot of your other cravings that would pull you out and get you to do unskillful things.

So take some time. The breath isn't something you simply step on so that you can climb to a higher level and then a higher level and a higher level in the practice. You have to settle in here. Learn how to appreciate this, because if you can't appreciate *this*, you're going to go back. If you can't find delight in this, you're going to go back to finding delight in sights, sounds, smells, tastes, tactile sensations. So take some time to really appreciate this. Learn how to cultivate the potentials that are here—in the way you breathe, in the way the breath energy circulates around the body—because that will allow you to change your allegiance.

As Ajaan Fuang said, if you want to be good at the meditation, you've got to be crazy about it. And one way of getting crazy about it is to find a real sense of satisfaction and to keep pursuing it, intrigued by the different ways the body might need to be nourished by this element of breath.

So learn to delight in being right here. It's a good place to be.