

Working Through the Breath

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People sometimes ask why we focus on the breath and they often have their opinions as why we shouldn't be focusing on the breath. One is that you want a place for the mind to stay as it goes through aging, illness, and death. And, of course when you die, the breath won't be there to focus on after death. So they say, "Why don't you focus directly on the mind?"

Part of the reason is because it's hard to focus directly on the mind.

Often the breath is what's getting in the way of seeing subtle things in the mind clearly. So you have to work through the breath in order to get to that point where you can look at the mind directly. And if you could focus on a state of awareness where you're blocking out the breath, that'd be a problem. You'd be blocking out an important part of your awareness. Insight doesn't come from a blocked out state of mind. It comes from an all-around state of mind, what the Buddha calls *mahaggatan cittam*, the enlarged mind. The image he gives of concentration is of an awareness that fills the whole body.

The second question is, "As you're focusing on the breath, why do you mess around with the breath? Why don't you just leave it alone?" The answer is that it's very hard to leave the breath alone because the breath is an intentional process in the body. It's what the Buddha calls bodily fabrication, and we have a lot of issues with the breath. Often we don't realize it, but they're there. You can start digging them up as you meditate. You find that as you work with the breath energy in certain parts of the body, memories come up. Attitudes come up. Emotions come up, because the way you breathe is an important part of the emotions.

There was once a teacher who heard that one of my former students was working on the breath this way. He said to her, "Why are you fooling around with the breath? Why are you trying to straighten out the breath? The breath is just a fabrication. It's just a sankhara." She mentioned that to me, and I told her that if he had said that to me, I would have responded, "Well, your body is just a sankhara. Why do you bathe it?" If you're not bathing your body, it means you've got some issues around the body that really should be looked into. And it's the same with the breath.

When we're focusing here on the breath, directing our thoughts to the breath, evaluating the breath, we're actually engaging in all the three levels of fabrication: bodily fabrication, which is the in-and-out breath; verbal fabrication, which is directed thought and evaluation; and then mental fabrication—feelings and

perceptions. The feelings here are feeling tones, such as pleasure, pain, or neither pleasure nor pain. The perceptions are the labels we apply to things.

As you're directing your thoughts to the breath and evaluating how comfortable it is, you're going to be using certain perceptions to stay with the breath. You'll also be finding that different ways of perceiving the breath or labeling it are going to have different effects on how you breathe, how the breath is sensed in different parts of the body. If you perceive the body as a bellows that has to pull the breath in, push the breath out, a lot of the breath energy, say, around the rib cage gets hardened, so that it can become a bellows.

If you think of the body as being more porous, though, that'll change the way you breathe. Different ways of thinking about the breath and evaluating it will give rise to different ways of breathing: for instance, when you're thinking about the breath in your toes and your fingers, the base of your spine, the breath in the bones, the breath in your brain—all these places you don't normally think about there being breath.

It's useful to range around in the body, to explore areas that you don't normally explore and think about the breath, to see in what direction the breath goes in those different parts of the body as it comes in and goes out. Here, we're talking more about the subtle breath energies. And try to notice: Are the different subtle breath energies in the body working together or are they working at cross-purposes? You want to look at that. Are there parts of the body that are really starved for breath energy? What can you do to provide them with more?

As you work on these issues, you're getting more and more practical experience, more sensitivity, through these different types of fabrication. You're actually creating a state of becoming.

This was another issue that was brought up one time with Ajaan Lee. He had been teaching meditation to a senior monk in Bangkok, who asked him one day, "We're practicing for the sake of getting rid of becoming, right?" The Pali word is *bhava*. And Ajaan Lee says, "Right." The senior monk said, "Well, why are we creating more states of becoming here as we create concentration?" Ajaan Lee responded, "That's the whole point. You're creating states of concentration so that you can study them, you can understand them: States of becoming like this—What are they? How are they made? As you learn how to do it skillfully in the concentration, then you're going to learn about other states of becoming as well, along with the processes by which they're formed." As he said, it's like having a chicken laying eggs. If you destroy the eggs, you'll never understand what eggs are all about. And you'll never get to eat the eggs.

Concentration gives you a sense of well-being, a sense of strength, and hands-on practice with what it means to create a state of becoming, because the same fabrications that construct a state of concentration are involved in your emotions as well. This is suggested by the fact that in Pali, the word *bhava*, with a short *a*, is the word for becoming, and the word *bhāva*, with a long *a*, is the word for an emotional state. They're very closely aligned.

You find that your emotions are fabricated out of the same raw materials. There's the perception and the feeling that goes along with the perception. You start thinking about and evaluating the situation in light of that perception. Then your body gets involved as well. There's an effect on the way you breathe. We all do this unconsciously—in fact, so unconsciously that we think our emotions are our basic states. They're almost what we are.

We think our feelings are the raw data of our experience, what we feel is most basic to what we are. So we often let our feelings, our emotions, take over because they seem to be so insistent and so basic. But, as the Buddha points out, they're as fabricated as anything else in your experience, and if you see that the emotion is unhealthy, causing suffering to you, causing suffering to other people, the fact that you've been working with the breath and working with these different types of fabrication gives you a handle for freeing yourself from it.

At the very least, you can breathe in a different way. Say that anger comes in: You can focus on the breath as a way of stepping outside of the anger. You'll notice, of course, that the anger has done something to the breathing, and then the breathing will have triggered off some hormones. So you try to calm the breathing down.

This means the hormones will still be sloshing around in your bloodstream for a while, so you learn to make a distinction between what you're doing with the breath and the leftover effects of what you *had* been doing with the breath before you were really paying attention. This gives you a better place to stay so that you can look at the remaining types of fabrication: the way you're thinking, your perceptions, your evaluations, your feelings—the pleasure or pain around this. You can start thinking about what you could do differently.

The fact that you're working with the breath means that this goes beyond just a mental exercise. You're getting into the physical side as well, which is important. That's why I said that we have issues around the breath, because breathing has a lot to do with the physical side of your emotions.

Then, working from that improved physical state, you can look more calmly at the other ways you're fabricating your anger. If you're seeing yourself as victimized, you might want to change that perception. Or if you're seeing yourself

on top of a situation where you're able to get back at somebody else, you might want to change that perception, too. If you're angry at somebody, you want to remind yourself: The fact that you're angry here means that you're probably going to say and do something stupid, because anger seems to block off certain good qualities, like a sense of shame and a sense of compunction, a sense of restraint.

And the more justified the anger and the more you feel that you've been unjustly treated, the more there will be perceptions in the mind that say, "Here's my chance to get back," or "Here's my chance to justify myself, to right a few wrongs."

But for the Buddha, the question always is not so much who was right and who was wrong, who deserves to suffer, who doesn't deserve to suffer. The question is: Do *you* want to suffer? Do you want to keep making yourself suffer? When the answer is No, then he gives you the tools for looking at the situation in a different way: holding different perceptions, thinking about it and giving yourself different narratives.

Learn to use your imagination, not because you want to say, "Well, the other person may be right." That may not be the case. That person may be dead wrong. But again, the question from the Buddha's point of view is: Do you want to keep suffering from that person's wrongness? If you don't want to keep suffering, you've got to change your perception of the situation. So you change the narratives you tell. That's the directed thought and evaluation.

You learn to question some of your knee jerk perceptions about what that other person's intentions were, how they think about you, what their attitude is toward you, realizing that, one, you don't really know and, two, even if you have a very good idea, still that's not the issue. The issue is: What are you doing to make yourself suffer? And do you want to keep on doing that?

So the fact that we're learning to work with the breath in all these different forms of fabrication in the present moment means that we get more sensitive. We can do this fabrication more skillfully and we can turn that knowledge to look at our emotions, realizing, as the Buddha said, that we're like someone coming in through the desert: hot, trembling, thirsty. We see that someone else has done something wrong. The Buddha says to perceive that person as a little bit of water in a cow's footprint. There's dirt there, but there's also water. You need the water. But you have to be very careful about how you take the water, because of the dirt in the footprint.

In the same way, you have to be very careful to focus on the good points of that person, knowing full well that there's a lot of bad in that person. But that's not what you want to take. You don't want to feed on the dirt. You want to feed on

the water, because you need the water. That's a very different perception from the one where you're the judge sitting on a bench fifteen feet up in the air, pointing down at these little people down below whose fate you're going to decide with no repercussions on yourself.

This is why the Buddha uses so many analogies and images and similes in his teachings: to give you a different range of perceptions, a different way of looking at things, a different way of fabricating your emotions and your experience.

Then there's that whole narrative about how many, many lifetimes you've been through, creating all kinds of karma, good and bad. Try to keep that perception in mind as well. Again, the purpose is not here to let people get away with murder. But first you've got to stop murdering yourself, murdering your goodness, creating more and more suffering for yourself.

Once you can sort out all these issues inside, then you're in a much better position to figure out what would be the skillful thing to do or say. If someone's doing something that you can stop, how do you stop them skillfully? And if right now is not the right time to say or do anything, when will be the right time? And what should you do and what should you say?

When you're more on top of the process of fabrication, you can do it more skillfully. That's one of the reasons why we focus here on the breath and work with the breath, so that we can create better states of becoming in the mind. It's only when we do the becoming skillfully that we can ultimately get to the point where we can go beyond becoming. You can't bypass this process. You have to go through this skill to get to that point beyond skill where all the fabrications fall away.

So focusing on the breath in this way teaches us important lessons about the mind—lessons we wouldn't have learned if we had focused just on the mind from the very beginning. This means that, even when the breath falls away at death, we'll be prepared to deal with whatever the mind tries to fabricate at that point—at the very least, to fabricate a good state of becoming to go to or, even better, to go beyond becoming altogether.

That's why we focus on messing around with the breath. It teaches us about the mind.