

Wearing the Breath

July 21, 2013

Unexpected things can happen: slow gentle, soaking rain in southern California in July, but apparently the conditions are right. The same principle applies to the mind. Unexpected things can happen that, when you've created the conditions, can be unexpectedly good or unexpectedly bad. So let's work on something unexpectedly good: getting the mind really quiet.

We hear again and again, "Don't get involved with your thoughts. Try to stay with the breath." Really take that seriously. There's the sensation of the breathing; right here, right now. Where is it right now? Keep your awareness right there. Don't go moving off; you don't even have to listen to the talk. Just be with how the breath feels, and notice where you feel it. Be right there at the sensation. Don't be up in your head looking down at the sensation. Be *in* the sensation. Then try to maintain that. Whatever issues come up, they're not important right now. The real issue is about getting to be right here, directly with the sensation and getting the mind used to that. It'll say it's bored, nothing's happening. So you say, "Wait. It's not the sort of thing you can set a timer for."

Ajaan Khamdi, one of the forest Ajaans, said that it's like hunting an animal. You have to be very still, very alert: still so that you don't scare off the animal; alert so that you notice when it comes. But as for when it's going to come, you can't make an agreement ahead of time. So you have to learn to maintain that sense of stillness and alertness at all times.

I've talked to some anthropologists and they say that when they try to learn the skills of the various societies they go to study, so that they can get an inside sense of what it's like to be in that society, there is one skill they've never been able to master, and that's hunting. You have to be extremely sensitive. Some

hunters say it's like wearing the landscape around you, as if you're wearing your own clothes.

This is the way you have to be with your breath. You're wearing your own breath. So inhabit it fully. And be strict with yourself: The slightest little thought that comes in to pull you away, you're not going to pay attention to it. And you have to figure out *how* for yourself. In some cases, you can give it a karate chop and that gets rid of it; in other cases, paying any attention to it at all, even to the extent of trying to cut it off, pulls you away. So see what works. You do have to use your own ingenuity in figuring out how to get your mind to settle down, because your mind has its own issues.

Ajaan Mun said that we're all the same, but we're all different; but then again we're all the same. The major issues are greed, aversion, and delusion. There are the hindrances of sensual desire, ill will, torpor and lethargy, restlessness and anxiety, uncertainty. These things happen to everyone. They can come into the mind, and you have to recognize them as hindrances; you don't identify with them. But how much you want to recognize them to best get rid of them without at the same time getting pulled away from the breath: That's something you have to figure out for yourself.

Each of us will have our own versions of defilements that will come in their own flavors. Your own particular sensual desires will be quite different from other people's. And the arguments that your mind has given for why it's good to go there will be different from other people's. So to that extent, you have to use your own ingenuity.

But as for the general outlines, it's all the same issue: learn how to wear the breath the same way the hunter wears the landscape, fully inhabiting it, sensitive to all the variations in the breath. When you're sensitive to the breath, you'll begin to notice when a thought is about to form. You can feel it, and that gives you your chance to head it off before it actually gets full blown

and you enter into its world.

So make use of this sensitivity to help keep you here. And if the mind says, "This is stupid. Nothing's happening," you can tell it that we're not here for something to happen. We're here to train the mind to see something unexpected, to see something new, and to do that you have to give it some new skills, like learning how to stay very, very still. You've been through your thoughts many, many times. And even though they seem to promise something new, what they provide is pretty much a matter of changing a few details here and there. The major substance, though, is all the same: something the mind fabricates and then it goes into the thought and takes a ride for a while. Then things fall apart, and you come back. You find something else and take a ride in another direction.

But here you want to inhabit the breath, wear the breath, and see what new things will come. As the Buddha said, it's all for the sake of knowing what you've never previously known, realizing what you've never previously realized, attaining what you've never previously attained. You're not going to get that through simply sitting there thinking about your thoughts, even if they feel like new thoughts. To attain something new, you have to do something new. So try to be really strict with yourself. You're not going to go anywhere else. You're going to work your awareness into the breath, and work the breath through the body.

Remember that image of the bathman's apprentice working the water through the pile of bath powder to turn it into a lump of bath dough so that the entire lump is saturated with water and it all holds together. That's the work you have to do. Once you've done that, then you stop working and just stay very still, firmly implanted in the breath. Get so that you're One with the breath. Let the breathing find its own rhythm. Let the depth of the breathing find its own depth. You're just One with it and that's all you have to do, stay planted in here. You'll find that when the mind gets used to being here, it's a really good place to be.

The reason you don't like it yet is because it's unfamiliar territory, and the mind has those committee members who want instant entertainment. But when you can settle down and gain a sense of being fully planted in the breath, fully wearing the breath throughout the body, then there's the sense you're at the spot where you *should* be. Everything begins to click. You settle in and it feels right. It feels like you've come back home.

So do what you can to make this house of body your home. Do what you can to inhabit it, until you're fully sensitive to it, and unexpected things will appear.