

## *Listening to the Practice*

*October 20, 2004*

Thinking about the breath and being aware of the breath are two different things. But they go together. The thinking here is designed to keep your attention focused, to keep reminding yourself that this is where you want to be, right with the sensation of the breathing. That's the function of mindfulness or *sati*. The awareness can also be translated as being self-aware, being alert—that's called *sampajañña*. It actually involves two things: One is noticing how the breath is going, how it feels; the other is noticing what you're doing.

Sometimes you're told to not do anything to the breath, just allow it to come in and out on its own without your directing it. A lot of people, after being told that and trying it for a while, begin to discover exactly how much they are subconsciously directing the breath. So it's good to bring that out into the open from the very beginning. The act of focusing is going to change the breath. Even quantum physicists know that the way you focus on something, the way you study something, is going to affect the outcome.

So you want to be sensitive to what you're doing. And this is a good way of developing a lot of sensitivity and also developing stronger concentration: working on allowing the breath to be more comfortable. Focus on it in a certain way and see what happens as a result. Then change your focus slightly—you might change the place you focus, the pressure of your focus—or you can simply think of having the breath change. Think “longer” and the breath will grow longer. And then you can decide whether you like the results of the changes you've made.

In other words, you're listening very carefully to the present moment, both to your actions and to the results of your actions. This is a very important function of the practice: seeing the connection between what you're doing and the results that come from what you're doing.

The breath is a good measure for this because it responds very quickly. You focus in a certain way, and the breath will respond immediately. It can either get constricted or it can get opened up; it can be painful and unpleasant or it can be very pleasant, extremely pleasant. Sometimes this depends on the condition of your body but a lot of times it depends on the condition of your focus. That's what you want to watch out for, what you want to learn to train yourself to do more and more skillfully. In this way, you become more sensitive to what's going on. As you become more sensitive, it's a lot more pleasant to stay here.

So be very attentive to this faculty of listening to the present moment, being observant. Instead of rushing in with a lot of preconceived notions about how the meditation should go, or making very quick snap judgments of what you've done, you watch again and again and again to get more and more sensitive. You may come to some conclusions but then you have to test them.

Over time, you find that it's not a matter of memorizing which techniques work in which situations. It's more the quality of the listening that's going to make all the difference. The more sensitive you are, the more quickly you can sense when something's wrong and you can adjust it. And you have a better and better sense of exactly how to adjust it. This principle is what you're going to be applying in further steps of the meditation. In other words, what you've memorized about how the breath works is not nearly as important as how you learn how to observe and how to be responsive to what you observe as it's happening. Those skills you can apply to anything in life, both your daily life and to deeper stages of the meditation.

So that's what we're working on, this quality of listening.

When I was staying with Ajaan Fuang in Thailand, he started right in on this principle from the outside level. If I was going to clean up his hut, I had to observe where he liked things to be placed. He wouldn't tell me. I'd have to watch on my own.

Ajaan Lee tells the story of when he was staying with Ajaan Mun. Ajaan Mun stayed in a hut whose walls were made out of banana leaves. Ajaan Lee would go in to straighten out Ajaan Mun's room in the morning after the meal, but Ajaan Mun would comment that the room was not the way he wanted it and he'd have to rearrange things. So finally Ajaan Lee hit on a plan. He poked a little hole in the banana leaves and watched to see, when Ajaan Mun set things out in the room, where he set them out. He tried to remember everything he'd seen, then went in the next day, placed things precisely as he'd seen Ajaan Mun place them, and then he ran outside and put his eye to the hole and watched. Ajaan Mun came in, he looked left, he looked right, he didn't see anything wrong, sat down and did his morning chants. Ajaan Lee felt very satisfied.

He had the advantage of having a banana leaf wall that he could poke his finger through. Ajaan Fuang's room had wooden walls, so you couldn't poke your finger through them. So you had to learn other ways of being observant. In other words, instead of just telling you to be observant, he required you to use your powers of observation, in the hopes that once you'd learned to use them on the exterior level, you'd use them on the interior level.

So try to develop these qualities on both levels.

This ability to listen, the ability to be quiet and watch: It's an important part of the meditation. Apply it to your interactions with other people and you learn a lot more. Things go a lot more smoothly. Your day-to-day life and your meditation become more and more of a piece. After all, it's the same mind interacting with people and then sitting down and interacting with the breath, so the habits are bound to have a crossover. So try to develop good habits in both areas. Be aware of what you're doing and the effect that it has. Listen. Observe.

If things aren't going well, don't just shrug them off. Try to use your ingenuity to find other approaches. All too often we approach the practice hoping for a single silver bullet that's going to solve all our problems. But in the Buddha's teachings there are no single teachings that

cover everything. Mindfulness is advisable everywhere, the Buddha said, but it can't carry the whole burden of the practice. You need other qualities as well.

Take the list on the sublime attitudes that we chant every evening. It starts with goodwill but it doesn't stop with goodwill. There's also compassion, empathetic joy, and equanimity. You need all four in order to keep things in balance.

For example, when you're practicing goodwill for yourself, a good way to practice is right here with the breath. You're perfectly free to breathe in whatever way feels good. It's a very immediate, very visceral way of showing goodwill for yourself. Instead of forcing the breath, pushing it, or keeping it restricted, you listen to it. See what kind of breathing feels good for the body. What kind of breathing would your body like? What kind of breathing would your legs like? What kind of breathing would your arms like? Your chest? Your shoulders?

They can't speak in any language, but you can tell by the way they feel as you breathe in and as you breathe out. Some ways of breathing will feel better, some ways of breathing put a lot of tension on the back, on the shoulders. If that's happening, see if you can breathe by using other parts of the body. Give the shoulders a vacation. Think of the breath as a healing process.

Again, the more sensitive you are to listening to what the body needs, the more you can actually heal it. In places where it's uncomfortable, show it some compassion. In places where it's already going well, be happy that it's going well. Value that, maintain it, because often that's going to be your stronghold. When things aren't going well in some parts of the body, at least you can stay focused on the areas where it *is* going well.

Then there are times when you run up against things in the body that you can't affect by the breath. No matter how you breathe, it's going to be painful or blocked or whatever, in which case you have to develop equanimity. That's what keeps you balanced. Otherwise, you keep banging your head against the wall trying to fix things that can't be fixed and neglecting the things that can.

When you learn how to relate to your breath in this way, you find that your inner skills of relating to yourself begin to embody a balance between goodwill, compassion, empathetic joy, and equanimity. You bring them out when they're needed and you balance them in this way. When you start treating yourself in this way, one, you don't have to go around remembering the names of these qualities, they become part of the way you deal with yourself internally. And two, when you can deal with yourself in this way, it's a lot easier to deal with other people using the same attitudes and developing that same sense of balance.

After all, if you're not piling a lot of unnecessary suffering on top of yourself, you can be a lot more sensitive to the sufferings of other people. And you actually have more strength not only to be sensitive but also to do what you can to minimize any discomfort, any inconvenience that you may be causing them. So being kind to your breath is a way of being kind to yourself and the people around you as well. The less you burden yourself with suffering, the less of a burden you are to other people.

And you develop more of that ability to observe, to be sensitive. What attitude precisely is needed in this particular point, in this particular place—this particular state of the breath, state of the mind, state of the body, state of the world around you? The practice of the Dhamma is very situational—not in the sense that everything is relative but in the sense of realizing that the particular technique, the particular approach that's needed really depends on the situation.

This falls in line with the teachings on karma. Part of the situation you're meeting up with in the present is something that comes from the past. Part of it is the result of what you're doing now. Sometimes you can't do much about what comes in from the past, but you *can* make a difference in terms of what you're doing, how you're approaching things right now. Getting sensitive to precisely where the line between those two elements lies requires that you have to keep practicing again and again and again.

When you look at the lists of teachings—the seven factors for awakening, the four establishing of mindfulness, the four sublime attitudes—remember that they're not just laundry lists. They function together as a set, as a reminder that the practice we're here doing is not something that can depend on a single silver bullet. You've got to have lots of bullets in your belt. You don't put them in your belt. You need lots of skills and you need a lot of sensitivity to know when to apply each particular skill. That's one of *the* most basic lessons in the meditation.

And it's a lesson you learn by being very alert, by being self-aware, noticing what you're doing, noticing what the results are, starting with simple things like the process of breathing and then moving inward to more subtle things, and outward to more blatant things—how you deal with the world around you.

So look and listen. Make that a habit.

As Ajaan Fuang once said, we have two ears but only one mouth. That should give you a sense of the proportion of how much you should listen and how much you should talk. And that applies not only externally but also internally, to that running commentary going on in the mind that's coming to conclusions about this, that, and the other thing. Make sure that it's well-informed by your ability to listen. And listen again and watch and watch again. Because that's where the real learning happens.