

Read the Breath

May 15, 2006

Try to notice what kind of breathing is right for the body right now. And how do you know? Experiment. Try longer breathing for a while and see how that feels. Shorter breathing, see how that feels. Deeper, more shallow: Learn how to read the breath. In other words, learn how to read what the body needs. Sometimes you see the effects of the breathing immediately; other times you notice it over time.

This ability to read your breath is a very important skill, because learning how to read the situation in your body and mind in general is where discernment comes. Discernment is not a matter of trying to clone the insights you read in books. It means being very sensitive to what's happening in the present moment, and what needs to be done, where things are out of balance. Sometimes the body is out of balance; sometimes the mind is out of balance. You need to get a sense of what balance is, what's just right.

The way you find just right is by going too far to the left, too far to the right, learning to read the warning signals for when you've gone too far, and then to make adjustments. If the meditation is making you sluggish, you've got to find ways of energizing yourself. The breath can help, but it's not just a matter of the breath. There's also the quality of awareness you're bringing to the meditation.

For many of us, meditation is a way to relax, because we need relaxation in our lives—up to a point. At other times, we need to be energized. You see this in what are traditionally called the three levels of concentration.

You start with momentary concentration, the concentration that basically allows you to function in life, where you can concentrate on reading a book or listening to somebody talk or on accomplishing a particular task at hand. It's called momentary because it's not all that continuous. It'll ride for a moment and then lose it; then ride for a moment, then lose it. You keep coming back, coming back, coming back, so that you can read the whole book, say, or listen to the whole conversation. That's our ordinary concentration.

And that's the concentration we have to develop. You can't drop it and say, "Well, I want stronger concentration. I'll try look for it someplace else." It doesn't exist someplace else. It exists in learning how to make that momentary concentration more continuous.

You'll notice that the little gaps in momentary concentration are caused by a sense of displeasure of some kind, maybe very subtle, just boredom or a slight

sense of discomfort. To see through those gaps, you have to be able to work with the discomfort. This is why we work with the breath. It gives you a practice in dealing with a sense of dis-ease and not shrink back from it. The breath may not seem all that comfortable to begin with, but you can learn to work with it. Or there may be patterns of tension in the body: Watch them for a while and allow the quality of your awareness—steady, unobtrusive, noninvasive—to allow those knots of tension in the body to untangle.

There's the question of whether it's wise to be more proactive in working with these patterns of tension or just to watch them. That's something you can learn only through trial and error. Different types of tension in the body will require different tactics. But it's working through the tension that gets you to the next level of concentration, which is called access concentration. Sometimes it's called neighborhood or threshold concentration. You're in the neighborhood of the real thing. You're on the threshold. You're gaining access to it. But you're not quite there yet.

This is the level where people tend to drift off. It's very comfortable. Momentary concentration can't withstand displeasure; access concentration can't withstand pleasure. In other words, it begins to blur out. You lose yourself. When people fall asleep in meditation, this is where they tend to fall. When they drift off into states where they can't quite be sure whether they were asleep or awake, this is where they were. And the way to get past that is to learn how to work with the pleasure.

This is why Ajaan Lee recommends spreading that sense of pleasure from the breath throughout the body and then trying to maintain full awareness of the body all the time. He calls this waking up the elements in the body, because that quality of full body awareness does wake you up. The breath gets very refined, and the more continuous you can make the full-body awareness, the more the mind feels awake, and the body feels energized.

This is what leads to fixed penetration, the third level of concentration, which is really solid. It's not a drifting kind of concentration. It's very solidly there. It's as if you're firmly planted or plugged-in to the body. There's a quality of strength. One of the images in the text is of a wooden door. Most people's bodies and minds are like balls of clay. You throw a stone into the ball and you'll make a big dent in it. But when your awareness fills the body, you're energized, and it's almost as if there were magnetic field around the body at that point. Things don't invade you as much as they did before. The Buddha's image is of a solid hardwood door: You throw a ball of string against it, and the string doesn't penetrate into

the door, doesn't even make an impression. That's the kind of solidity and energy you want to develop in the meditation.

So this is not just a relaxation practice or a stress-reduction practice. It energizes the mind.

Now, this takes work. You have to put some energy in to it in order to get the energy out of it. It's like running any kind of business: You've got to invest. You've got to be willing to sink some money into it before you can get the profit out of it. So you put the energy into maintaining this full body awareness no matter what happens. It takes effort and, in the beginning, it's not all that easy for some people. Some people find it easy; other people don't. But you've got to learn how to inhabit your whole body and stay there all the time.

The reason is not only that it energizes you, but also that you begin to see the movements of the mind that would shrink. What are they shrinking from? When the mind shrinks to go out after something, why is it going out? What's the attraction? This way, while you're trying to maintain your concentration, you start getting insight into the mind itself.

Alternatively, when you've developed a good strong state of concentration like this, then when issues come up in life, you want to use this as the basis from which you approach them. When there are things you want to think through, get the mind energized. Get it cleared. Get it fully in the body like this for a period of time. Say you've got an hour to meditate, and you want to think through a particular issue. Well, devote at least fifty minutes out of the hour to this full-body awareness. Then you can bring up the issue during the last ten minutes. And often in the context of this enlarged awareness, you can see more sides of the issue than you might have otherwise.

So the pleasure of concentration is not an end in and of itself. In fact, it's one of the problems. Some people find this frustrating. They work hard to get the mind to relax and you say, well, you can't stay right there. That's not because pleasure is a bad thing, but simply that you have to learn how to use it. This is a lot of what the Buddha's teachings are about. We tend to think of pleasure or ease as an end in and of itself. And he says, No, you've got to invest it. Learn how to use a sense of pleasure you can create simply by being here in the present moment to energize the mind, so that it's in a better position to see things clearly. When it sees things clearly, then it can let go of them.

What does it mean to see? The Buddha in his description of his awakening, sets out a really useful pattern. His first knowledge in the night was knowledge of his past lives. In other words, he looked at his personal narratives, his stories.

Now, his stories went way back. Maybe we can't remember our previous lives, but at least we can remember what we've done in the past as best we can.

So if you've got a problem in life, the first thing you've got to do is to look at what led to this problem. What did you do that brought this problem about? This is not to say that you're the one at fault all the time, but look at it for your own contribution. Why is it a problem for you?

Then in the next stage, in the Buddha's second knowledge, he looked not only at his own life, but also at the lives of all beings, seeing how they died and were reborn in line with their karma, and how their karma was shaped by their views.

What this shows is that after you've looked at your own personal contribution to the particular problem, try look at things in terms of universal patterns. When other people have this kind of problem, what do they do? Have you seen other people handle this problem well, or have you seen them handle it poorly? See what lessons you can learn from those larger patterns.

With the third knowledge, the Buddha looked at his mind in the immediate present. He had seen how karma was so important in shaping people's lives, but where is the karma right now? Where is it being done right now? What is it right now? It's the intention. What are your intentions right now? Are they skillful or are they not? What would be a skillful intention in this particular situation?

So you go from the story to the universal pattern and then to your intentions in the present moment. In all these cases, the Buddha used his mind in concentration as his foundation for doing this analysis, for exploring the problem. In his case, it was the problem of suffering at large. But as for your particular sufferings, the same pattern applies.

So we're sitting here focusing on the breath not simply because the breath can become a comfortable place to stay—although it is a good place to hang out, with a sense of ease in the present moment. The Buddha said that is one of the rewards of concentration, but you can't just sit there and eat up the rewards. Ajaan Lee said it's like getting a coconut and just eating the coconut. That's it, one coconut, that's all you've gained. The alternative is to take the coconut and plant it, and it becomes a coconut tree. The coconut trees give lots of coconuts. You eat a few of those, but you plant most of them. And ultimately you've got a whole coconut orchard.

There's work to be done with the pleasure here to use it as a basis for giving the mind energy, for putting it in a position where it really can start looking at its problems. Now, the amount of concentration you're going to apply to a particular problem really depends on the situation. We'd like to think that we could work on nothing but concentration until we're ready to go on straight to insight, but

problems come up in life and you have to deal with them using what you've got. And there really is no clear line between concentration and insight.

When you look at the Buddha's description of the noble eightfold path, the first five factors are simply lists: the things you avoid, the things you develop. But when you get into those last three, the ones that build up to right concentration, right effort is a long formula, which involves not just brute effort, but some discernment, seeing what's skillful, what's unskillful, what should be maintained, what should be abandoned, what should be prevented from happening, how you should motivate yourself to do the right thing, and how to do it skillfully. That requires a certain amount of insight right there in understanding the ways of the mind.

With right mindfulness there's also a long formula: keeping track of the body in and of itself, mindful, alert and ardent, putting aside greed and distress with reference to the world. That's just one part of the formula, and it involves some insight, too. That ardency is a factor of right effort, which means that you're looking for what's skillful and what's not skillful, how you can develop skillful qualities in the mind, how you can to abandon unskillful ones. That's an inherent part of right mindfulness. It's what makes it right.

The same with right concentration: having abandoned unskillful qualities in the mind, you can settle down until you develop pure equanimity and mindfulness. As the Buddha said, there's no right concentration without a certain amount of insight, a certain amount of understanding. You can't get the mind to settle down unless you understand it.

So all these factors that go into right concentration—right effort, right mindfulness, right concentration—require a certain amount of insight to begin with. This ability to read the situation, to figure out what's right for right now, requires not only that you look consistently, but that you also learn to use your powers of judgment properly. You learn to use your powers of ingenuity properly. When something is not working, try something else.

So right concentration gets you on the road to developing discernment because there's discernment that's implicit, that's inherent within the concentration itself. It's not simply that it provides you with a still place to stay, but it's also started you asking the right questions, developing your inner sensitivity for what's right, right now, so that you can read situations. The better you're able to read your own mind, then the more sensitive you'll be to situations outside, the more easily you'll be able to read them. And for things that are hard to read, it gives you a place where you can stay and watch for long periods of time until you finally figure them out.

So remember that the pleasure of right concentration serves a purpose. One of its purposes is to give you a sense of ease in the present moment, and the other purpose is to give you something to work with, to energize the mind, to put it in a position where it really can start seeing the places where it's clinging, places where it's holding on to things that are unskillful, or to figure out what a skillful way of holding on might be if you still have to hold on, until ultimately you can let go. But don't let go until the work is done.

So keep working at reading the breath, reading the mind, because it gives you help in reading and solving all the problems that are causing you to suffer, all the problems that are giving you stress.