

Breathaholic

September 29, 2008

When you're practicing concentration, you try to make it right concentration—in other words, you try to get it to fall in line with the Buddha's description of jhana. We usually translate the word jhana as absorption, and if you're going to be absorbed in the breath, it really has to be interesting, pleasurable.

This is why it's important that you evaluate the breath. See how it feels. Notice how the breathing process feels in the different parts of the body and the different *ways* it can feel.

This is something you discover over time. Sometimes you can see the effects immediately. You breathe in a particular way, and there's an immediate sense of ease. In other instances, it takes a longer time to see the effects. Something that may seem nice as you get started out actually starts getting oppressive over time. If you're forcing the breath too much, you can give yourself a headache or a backache. And you don't really know what how much "too much" is until you've given yourself a couple of headaches. So take that in stride.

You want to be a connoisseur of your breathing, even though that's not the ultimate goal of the practice. The ultimate goal of the practice is to use the breath as a means for settling down so that it can discern its defilements and gain release. But to get the mind settled down, you focus your attention completely on the breath to begin with. As Ajaan Fuang used to say, "You have to be crazy about meditation if you want to do it well." You really have to be addicted to it; you want to cling to it for a while.

They say that alcoholics, when they walk into a house, very quickly pick up on where the alcohol is in the house. They may be pretending to listen to the conversations, but they're looking for the signs. Maybe they're not even aware of it, but they pick up on the signs very quickly—where the alcohol is kept. It's the same with chocoholics; they know where the chocolate is kept. When you try to become a breathaholic, whatever the situation you're in, you want to ask, "Where is the breath right now? How is the breath going?"

In the beginning, this requires an act of will to keep reminding yourself: This is where the comfort's going to be found. But as the breath gets more comfortable, and you get a sense of how the breath will have an effect on the body and on the mind, it becomes more and more the mind's inclination to look for the breath while you're driving, while you're working—while you're doing any activity. And you learn to breathe comfortably regardless of what the activity may be. You can

make it a game when you're in a difficult situation: How comfortable can you keep the breath? You find you can keep it very comfortable. The breath doesn't have to be affected by the outside situation. If you let it be affected, it will be, but it doesn't have to be. That's an important lesson to learn.

If you're the sort of person who opens yourself up to the effects of any situation, you find yourself without a ground, without a foundation. So it's important that you have a strong sense of your personal space here in the body—the space of the breath. Try to fill the body with your awareness. Inhabit your body fully; inhabit the breath fully; let the breath inhabit the body. Let all these things come together in a sense of fullness, and that'll help repel any outside influences. It's not that you're unaware of them, simply that they don't come in and mess with your breathing. Once you develop this skill, you really do become addicted to the breath because you find that it's your protection in all kinds of situations.

You need this grounding because the world outside isn't designed to be nurturing and kind. Sometimes it can be kind, sometimes not. Sometimes causes and conditions can work for a very pleasant situation, and sometimes they can turn on you very quickly. So you need your inner foundation to be solid. You can't let yourself get heedless, careless, or complacent, because the world could change very suddenly.

Even the situation in your body can change suddenly. Pains can appear out of nowhere, it seems, though they don't come out of nowhere. They do have their source. If you're sensitive to the breath, you can catch these things as they happen, as they're beginning to happen. You make sure that even though the pain may grow, it doesn't have to have an effect on the mind. And it doesn't have to put a squeeze on your breath. One common habit when you're in pain is to try to close off the pained area so that it doesn't spread, and what that does is that it deprives that area of the breath. Or you find yourself actually using the pained area to breathe. The muscles in that part of the body are forced to breathe, and they get worn out pretty quickly.

Remind yourself that the breath is not hindered by anything. A pain may seem to put up a wall in the body, but the breath doesn't have to be hindered by the wall. It can go right through. It's your preconceived notion about the wall that's preventing the flow, but the flow doesn't have to be prevented. The flow of the breath has no boundaries—no boundaries in space, no boundaries in time. A common habit while we're focusing on the in-breath and out-breath is trying to make a very clear line between the in-breath and the out-breath. We usually do

that by tensing up the muscles a little bit. But remind yourself that that's artificial, an unnecessary stress and an unnecessary strain on the breathing.

So learn to conceive of the breath as something where the boundaries are fuzzy, and the breath is totally free to move. It has no obstructions at all. That way, your sense of grounding becomes grounding in ease, in pleasure, in refreshment. That's the only kind of grounding that can, one, be absorbing, and two, be the sort of grounding you can maintain. If it's difficult, if it's harsh, you're not going to stick with it. No matter how strong a sense of duty you may have toward the meditation, it's just not going to last. There has to be the sense of ease, a sense of well-being. Otherwise, the mind is going to go feeding other places. As long as it has this tendency to feed, give it something good to feed on right here.

As the Buddha pointed out, this is a harmless pleasure—harmless in the sense that it doesn't place any burdens on anyone else and in the sense that it doesn't obscure your vision. If our pleasure depends on things outside, we get blinded because pleasure that's based outside has to have its drawbacks, yet we don't want to see the drawbacks, so we close our eyes to them. But this is a kind of pleasure that doesn't require that you close your eyes. You may need to close your eyes in the beginning, as you meditate, just to prevent distractions. But as you get more and more grounded in the breath, more absorbed in the breath, you not only keep your physical eyes open, you keep your mental eyes open as well. You see where the pleasure comes from, and you can see that it causes no harm to anyone. That allows the mind to open and be more sensitive to all kinds of areas that it used to desensitize itself to.

So as long as the mind is going to feed and cling, have it feed and cling here. Allow the breath to become absorbing because you need this grounding; you need this foundation. You need to have this space as your space—a space that's not invaded by things outside—because that's the only way you can maintain any sense of solidity, any sense of certainty in this very uncertain world.