

## *Respect for the Breath*

*July 25, 2009*

Each time you meditate, remind yourself that you're doing something important. You're training the mind. This is important because the mind is the ultimate source of all true happiness and all true suffering. It's the factor that makes all the difference in your life. So it needs to be trained. And remind yourself also that the happiness you're looking for is a happiness that comes from inside, a happiness that doesn't harm anybody—doesn't harm yourself, doesn't harm other people. This is a very special kind of happiness.

Which means that you want to come at this with an attitude of respect. In other words, you want to pay careful attention to what you're doing. You want to be very observant and very honest. Those are the two qualifications that the Buddha asked for in a student: Is the student observant? And is the student truthful, both to other people and to him or herself?

Once you've reminded yourself of the importance of what you're doing, then you can settle down. Focus on the breath. When the breath comes in, where do you feel it? When it goes out, where do you feel it? If it doesn't seem clear, take a couple of good long, deep in-and-out breaths. You may notice the breath in the nose, at the tip of the nose, or deeper into the nose. You may notice the rise and fall of the chest, the rise and fall of the abdomen. What you're looking for is not so much the air coming in and out the lungs, but the sensation of breathing in the body. Notice where it seems most prominent and allow your attention to settle there. Notice how it feels as you breathe in, how it feels as you breathe out.

The next question is: Is it comfortable? Does it feel good when you breathe in? Or does it feel tense? Do you tend to pull things in too much or push things out too forcefully? Just pose that question the mind and ask yourself what kind of breathing would feel better, and see how the body responds. It may start breathing in a different rhythm, deeper or more shallow, heavier or lighter, faster or slower. So watch it.

If you don't see any change in the way you're breathing, you might want to experiment—say, try longer breathing for a while, and see what that does. Then try shorter breathing, deeper or more shallow. In other words, bring some intention into the process, until you gain a sense that this kind of breathing feels really good, this kind of breathing feels energizing, this kind of breathing feels relaxing. Ask yourself, what do you really need right now?

This is the tender part of the meditation. You're trying to be sensitive, as sensitive as possible to the breath.

The more resolute part of the meditation is when any other thoughts come in, you don't get involved with them, regardless. Always try to be mindful, always try to be alert. "Mindful" here means that you always keep the breath in mind. It might help to think of the idea the whole body is breathing. Because "breath" means not only the process of breathing, but also the energy flow in the body. It's through the energy flow that you actually sense your body. Sometimes we have the idea that we're primarily aware of the solid parts of the body, and the breath is a visitor. But when you think of the energy flowing through the nerves, it's because of that energy that you're aware of the body. So the breath comes first. It's your primary element or the primary property of the body.

So whatever sensations you feel in the body, try to relate them to the idea of breath, and sense them as a kind of breath. Are they good breath or bad breath? Do they feel blocked or do they flow well? If they're blocked, how can you work through the blockage?

That's the next step in the process. Once you've got a sense that the breath feels good—in other words, there's no tension building up as you breathe in; when you breathe out, you're not squeezing things out, you're not holding onto any tension in the process, the breath just goes out naturally—then the next step is to start surveying the body to see how the breathing process feels in the different parts of the body.

You might start at the navel, go up the front of the body, up into the head then down the back, out the legs. Start at the back of the neck and go down the shoulders and out the arms—section by section, watching the breathing process and how relates to that part of the body. If you find any tension or tightness anywhere, think of it relaxing. Or if that part of the body feels starved for breathing energy, think of the breath going right into that part of the body. You might find that some parts of the body are hard to feel—maybe part of your shoulder seems to be missing. Okay, try to notice where you have a sensation of the breath in the body, where there's a sense of the body's being there. You might have a sense of your chest, and a sense of your lower arm, but for some reason your upper arm and shoulder are missing. Well, see where they connect. The sensation of connection might actually seem to be outside of the skin. Wherever it is, allow that part of the body to open up and participate in breathing.

You can do this survey of the body as many times as you like, because each time you do it, you tend to notice things you missed the previous times. Your sensitivity will grow. Keep this up until you have a sense of the whole body

breathing together. When you're breathing, the whole body is participating. No one part of the body is fighting against the other parts. Just spread your awareness to fill the whole body, so that you're aware of the whole body breathing, the whole body breathing out. Keep tabs on what feels good as you do that.

Again, you might find that you need to adjust the breath a little bit more. That's perfectly fine. Or if things just seem perfectly fine already, then just stay with that. But always be alert to the fact that the needs of the body are going to change as you sit here. In other words, as the mind settles down, there's less activity in the brain. Your oxygen needs go down. So the breath can get shorter, lighter. There may be spaces between the breaths. That's perfectly okay. Just be aware: "Now the breath is still. Now it's moving. Now it's still again." It may stop for a while and then start up again. That's fine, too. Just keep tabs on what it's doing but don't force it too much. All you want to do is try to make sure that your awareness of the breath is steady.

Again, that's the resolute part of the meditation: that you're sticking with this. The more continuous your awareness, more you're going to see. So the resoluteness goes together with the sensitivity. If you stick with the breath for a while then wander off, come back, wander off, you're going to miss a lot. You're not going to be really sensitive to how the breath is affecting the body, how your awareness is affecting the breath. To see these things clearly, you have to be really consistent, very steady, unwavering in your focus, so that you can be more sensitive to the breath. If you force the breath too much, it's going to have bad consequences both in the body and in the mind.

As Ajaan Suwat once said, a well concentrated mind is both soft and hard: soft in the sense that you're very sensitive to your object, very sensitive to how the body feels and how the mind is relating to the body; but hard in the sense that you're not going to waver. You're going to stay just with this whole-body sensation, this whole-body awareness. Any other thoughts that come into the range of your awareness, you just let them go.

This is one of the advantages of whole-body awareness. If you try to be one-pointed, then if you sense any other thought coming into the mind, it means your point has changed. But if you have a large range of awareness, the thoughts can come in and they don't destroy your larger framework.

This again is where the attitude of respect comes in, as in that chant just now, "those who are ardent with respect for concentration," because the mind will start asking you, "Hey, what are you doing? Just sitting here very still, not thinking about anything? Isn't it stupid?" Well, no. It's not stupid. You're training the mind, training the qualities of the mind.

So you want to have respect for this process, because the mind does tend to insist that its other thoughts, its ideas, its desires, its likes and dislikes are more important.

A Chan master once said that the great way is not difficult for those with no preferences. What that means is you do what you have to do to follow the path, whether you like or not. But to help with this, you want to make the breath as satisfying as you can, so that the mind will feel less hungry to go after its thoughts. The mind may say, "But my thoughts are really good thoughts. They're very intelligent." Well, not for right now. You need to have a sense of time and place. The mind needs to rest. It needs to expand its awareness like this, to have a sense of well-being, not being constricted, not being confined, so that it can comment on its thinking with a greater sense of refreshment.

It's the same way you can comment other issues in your life when you have to when you feel a greater sense of refreshment. You get yourself less strung out. You feel less threatened by issues outside, because you have a source of happiness inside. You want to respect this. Wherever your happiness comes from, you want to take care of that. And even though, in the beginning, the pleasures of concentration may not seem all that impressive, as you get to know the breath better and better, you find it has more and more to offer.

So be sensitive with the breath. Show some respect to the breath, too. What your body tells you it needs in terms of breath energy, give it some. This is an area we tend to overlook, because we have so many other "more important" things to do. This huge potential for happiness comes from within gets neglected.

So show some respect for your desire for true happiness, respect for your desire for a happiness that causes no harm to anyone, respect for your desire for happiness that you can really depend on. Try to be sensitive to the breath and yet firm in the determination that you're going to stay here to learn to see what it has to offer. This is what provides the foundation for the training of the mind.

There are other steps, other stages in the practice but you want to make sure you get this one really solid, really mastered, because everything else depends on this.