

Befriending the Breath

February 16, 2010

To stay focused on the breath, you have to regard it as your friend and look at meditation as a way of developing a friendship. It's going to take some time, and you have to be observant to see what your friend likes, to show your friend that you can be trustworthy—because sometimes the body reacts negatively to all the attention you're paying to it. In the past, you've ignored it, you've treated it harshly, so it may not trust you. You have to show that you're trustworthy this time around.

You're going to be patient. You're going to watch the breath to see what kind of breathing feels good. You're not going to come in with a lot of preconceived notions about how the meditation should go. Just look after the causes, i.e., you're mindful, you keep the breath in mind all the way through the in-breath, all the way through the out-. And you're alert, you pay attention to what's happening. How does the breath feel good? How does the breath not feel good? What parts of the breath are you not acquainted with? Start out with the areas where it's easy to notice the sensation of breathing coming in, going out—the areas where you're familiar with the breath.

But always keep in mind that you may have a strange way of thinking about the breath. So be alert to the fact that maybe the way you're breathing is not as comfortable as it could be. Try different ways of conceiving the breath.

This is where Ajaan Lee's method is useful. Think of the breath not just as the air coming in and out of the lungs, but also as the energy flow in the body. When you breathe in, where do you feel energy moving in your body? When you breathe out, how does it feel? Do you put pressure on it as you breathe in? Do you squeeze it out when you breathe out? Try to relax your shoulders, relax your arms, all the way through the in-breath, all the way through the out-.

And notice other places in the body where you tend to add a little tension to the in-breath or a little tension to the out-. When you notice that, see if the next breath you can breathe in, breathe out, without that tension. See how the breath responds, how the body responds. See how your mind responds.

If you find your mind wandering away, just remind yourself that those friends you're wandering away with—your thoughts, memories of the past, anticipations of the future, all those perceptions: You've been friends with them long enough. You know what kind of friends they are. Sometimes they help you and sometimes

they don't. They're not reliable. So wish them well and then come back to the breath.

This is an important principle. Sometimes you see the face of somebody who's wronged you in the past or someone you've wronged: Wish that person well. Say, "I'm here to make my mind a better mind, so that I'm not disturbed by what other people do. If there's anything unskillful I've done in the past, I'm going to learn how not to do it again." How do you do that? By developing good qualities in the mind, like the alertness, the mindfulness, and the sensitivity you develop as you meditate.

So you're here to work on a new friendship. Or if you've been meditating for a long time, you want to develop this friendship to see how far it can go. After all, the Buddha describes the steps of breath meditation that can take you all the way to nibbana. This practice can get that profound.

So it's not the case that you focus on the breath and then you forget about it. You use the breath as an anchor even when you're focusing on the mind. The way to focus on the mind is first to get it anchored to the breath and in touch with the breath, so that you know you're staying in the present moment—because that's where you want to observe the mind. If the mind slips off into the past, into the future, you're not observing the mind. You're just flowing along with these currents that come through and take you away.

It's like watching a movie. You have the choice: of getting totally involved in what seems to be happening up on the screen: There are people up there. There are locations up there. All kinds of dramas are happening up there. Blood is being shed. People are falling in love, whatever. That's what it seems like when you get into the movie. But you also have the choice of stepping off to the side of the movie theater and then looking across the room. You see that something else is happening. You see a beam of light from the projector flashing on the screen, and the colors flashing—red, yellow, white, green, blue—and people reacting to these flashing colors. You can see that the screen is very thin and there's nothing really happening up there. It's just colors, lights. Yet people are laughing and crying and getting excited, getting scared, whatever. That's when you really understand what's going on.

It's the same with the mind. If you let yourself get carried off in the thoughts of past, thoughts of future, it's like getting into the movie and actually thinking there's something happening up there on the screen, and reacting to what seems to be happening up there. But if you can stay anchored in the present moment, then you can watch the lights flashing but you don't get sucked in. The process is happening but you don't have to identify with it.

This is important. This is how you come to understand how the mind creates its reality. Often it's an illusory reality. And it causes itself unnecessary suffering, even when it thinks it's having a good time.

So you've got to learn to be a bit dubious about some of these other friends you've been hanging out with, the old movies that come running up in your head. If you find yourself getting sucked into the movie, remind yourself, where there's a movie, there's a movie theater. So just look at it as a movie theater, and not an actual story. Then you can start seeing how the mind gets sucked into the movie. What are the stages? It starts out just as a little perception in the mind, a little image of the mind, that becomes a whole world that you can get involved in. Where do you surrender to the world? Where do you have the choice *not* to surrender?

One of these ways of seeing this is learning how to catch your thoughts quickly. One of the strange things about meditation is that people's minds wander off and then they're surprised to find they've wandered off. They get back to the breath and say, "I'm going to really stay with the breath this time and I'm not going to wander off." Five minutes later, they're off again. And they're surprised again. It's important to learn how not to be surprised. In other words, expect that there will be other thoughts coming into the mind, but you're going to be prepared for them. Notice when the mind begins to edge away from the breath. It's there with the breath but it's looking around for someplace else to go. It's like a bug that has come to the edge of a leaf, and its feelers are going out, feeling around to see where there's something else to jump to. If the breeze blows and another leaf comes by, the bug goes onto the other leaf.

It's that moment of coming to the edge and feeling around: That's what you want to catch in the mind. As soon as you sense that happening, you've got to redouble your efforts. Ask yourself, what would be a really good breath right now? Part of this friendship you're developing with the breath is learning that the needs the body are going to change, sometimes from breath to breath. So you don't want the breathing to become mechanical. If it starts becoming mechanical and automatic, pretty soon the whole thing goes on automatic pilot, and your attention is wandering off someplace else.

So you want to remind yourself that you're learning something important here. Even before you start learning about the mind, you're going to learn a lot of things about the body. There's a sense of form you have here. As we've mentioned earlier, the pleasure that comes from the breath is not a sensual pleasure. It's a pleasure of form: the sense of the body as it's felt from within. You want to explore that sense as much you can, because it has a huge impact on your health.

The way the energy flows in the body will determine which parts the body get well-nourished with the blood, which parts don't. So if you can get the breath energy flowing smoothly and easily throughout the whole body, you're helping nourish everyone.

At the same time, when the whole body feels more and more relaxed with the breath, more and more nourished and soothed by the breath, it's easier for the mind to settle in and be happy to stay here. So you want to be very sensitive each time you breathe in, each time you breathe out. Pay attention to this new friend you're trying to develop here. You're still learning about the friend. As with all friends, it'll respond if you pay attention to what it needs. Be sensitive to its needs. And as a response, you find that you feel a lot more at home here in the breath, a lot more at home here in the body as well.

As for those other old friends, you wish them well. There's that chant we had this evening: wishing well to snakes, beings with no feet, beings with two feet, beings with four feet, beings with many feet. "May they all be happy." But then, as you notice at the very end of that, "May they all go away." The chant comes from a time when some monks were going to the forest. One particular monk was bitten by a snake and died. The other monks went to report this to the Buddha, who said, "Well, it's obvious that that monk hadn't spread thoughts of goodwill to the four royal families of snakes."

So he taught the monks this blessing: wishing well to all these beings, remembering that even snakes have a heart. They suffer, too. They want happiness, too. But at the same time, snakes have nothing to offer us, and we really have nothing to offer to snakes, other than goodwill. So we wish them well. May they not come to any harm. And may they not get entangled with us. Human beings and snakes don't usually have very good interactions. So you wish them well. Leave them alone. Hope that they leave you alone.

One of the reasons we chanted tonight is that I noticed a little rattler this morning up here on the pad. With the warm weather like this, the snakes are going to come out. So keep an eye out, but wish them well. You go your way; they go theirs.

And it's the same with these wandering thoughts that come into the mind. You wish them well. But you go your way; they go theirs. At the moment, they have nothing to offer you. You have nothing to offer them. You're working on a different friendship that's going to be a lot more rewarding.

So keep focusing your efforts here—on the breath coming in, the breath going out, on the way the breath energy feels throughout the body—and allow it all to become coordinated. If you find the energy in one part of the body seems to

be working at cross purposes with the energy in another part, step back a bit. Just pose the question in your mind: How could those different parts in the body work together? If there's a lot of pressure in your head, don't focus your attention up here. Focus your attention down in the body. Leave the head alone for the time being. And remind yourself that there's a lot of room to play here. After all, this is a friend. As when you're a child, the whole point of having a friend was that you got to play with the friend. So as you get more and more sensitive to the breath, you can begin to play with it.

One way of counteracting a lot of pressure in your head is thinking that when you breathe in, the energy in the body flows down, down, down. Think of it like butter melting down your shoulders, melting down your arms and out your hands, melting down your back, down your legs. In other words, you can use your imagination to help the process along.

As with any friendship, it takes time. It takes a lot of your powers of observation. But it's a friendship that can take you far. Keep that thought in mind when your old friends come around to bother you. Tell them you've got work to do here. You're learning something very new, something very important. You wish them well and then you get back to work. But the work here is good work. And as I said, it involves a fair amount of play.

So try to be very clear about who your true friends are, who your false friends are—not only outside, but especially inside. Work on the friendship that shows the most promise.