

Fabrication at the Breath

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Sometimes it's possible to sit and watch your breath, and nothing seems to be happening. Breath is going in. Breath is going out. You're aware. And that seems to be about it.

There was one time when the Buddha was recommending to the monks that they practice breath meditation. One of the monks spoke up, saying, "I'm already doing breath meditation." And the Buddha asked him, "What kind of breath meditation are you doing?" The monk said, "I put aside my hankering after the past, and put aside my hankering after the future. I just sit and try to be very equanimous in the present moment as I breathe in and breathe out." And the Buddha said, "There is that kind of breath meditation, but," he said, "it doesn't give great fruit or great benefit." So he took the opportunity to teach a type of breath meditation that did give great fruit and great benefit.

He went through the sixteen steps, which involve a lot of training. The first two steps simply say to notice when the breath is long and when it's short. But then beyond that, the Buddha gives you things to do. And each of these things to do is like a question: How do you do that?

The first thing he says is to be aware of the whole body as you breathe in and breathe out. Then as you do that, you begin to notice the effect the breath has on the body, whether it's comfortable or not. So you try to calm that effect, to give rise to a sense of pleasure and a sense of refreshment.

That immediately alerts you: There's something to be explored here. What kind of breath is really refreshing? How far can you push it? Sometimes you find that as you experiment with the breath, you make things worse, so you back off again and try another approach. You might find that you're putting too much pressure on the breath. Okay, the next time when you experiment, you say, "Just try thinking, 'long breathing,' 'short breathing,' 'deep,' 'shallow,' and see how the body responds, without your having to put any pressure on it at all. Or just pose the question: What kind of breathing would feel really good right now? And see how it responds."

What you're doing is developing insight and tranquility at the same time. The tranquility comes from just staying with the breath and trying to keep things calm. The insight comes from seeing things in terms of what the Buddha calls fabrication. How does the body get fabricated by the breath? What kind of influence does the breath have on the body? Here, fairly quickly in the

meditation, he's having you look at things in terms of cause and effect, and particularly, cause and effort around the issue of what's going to be comfortable, what's not comfortable.

How would you rate breathing as comfortable or uncomfortable? Some types are obviously uncomfortable, but have you ever explored how really comfortable the breath can be?

So we're trying to put tranquility and insight together, starting with the stillness, the steadiness when you watch something and you find that the steadier your gaze, the smoother the breath can be. If your gaze is jumping around, then gaps and irregularities can appear in the breath. But if you're watching continually, it's like spinning out a fine thread: It just keeps going and going and going and going and going and going and it's all very continuous. Things get smoother. It doesn't have to be as jumpy as it sometimes can be.

Then you start getting more sensitive to the various levels of pleasure and refreshment that can come from the breath. You begin to notice how the pleasure and the refreshment can have an effect on the mind. This is another level of fabrication. It's called mental fabrication.

Essentially there are two things that have this kind of impact on the mind. One is the feeling of pleasure that you're trying to create, and the variations in that level of pleasure. Then there are the perceptions, which are the mental labels you hold in the mind about your breath. When you breathe in, where do you think the breath comes in? What is the breath anyhow? It's not just the air coming in and out of the lungs. It's an energy flow. So perceive it as that, an energy flow, and this energy flow can come in and out of the body anywhere. It can come down from the top of the head, in from the back of the neck, in the middle of your back. Take a survey down your backbone. Where do things feel tight and out of balance? Think of the breath energy just coming in right there: lots of energy, full energy.

Notice how that tense spot changes during the in-breath, how it changes during the out-breath. If it feels comfortable, stick with it. If it doesn't feel comfortable, try changing. How do you hold the back in such a way that the breath comes in and goes out and is healing for that spot of tension or blockage?

You can go anywhere in the body, anywhere where there's that feeling of the energy not moving well, and explore: What would it be like for it to move well? What kind of perception do you have to hold in your mind in order to stay with it? Explore the variations, the possibilities.

They can come with the breath; they can come with the different ways you, fabricate your state of mind through feeling and perception. Again, you're doing

two things at once. You're getting the mind still because it's interested. You're not having to force it to stay here, but there's something to explore. And you're exploring particularly the issue of fabrication, which is precisely what insight is all about. How does the mind fabricate things? How does the breath fabricate your sense of the body? How do feelings and perceptions fabricate your mind?

The way you direct your thoughts and the way you evaluate things: How does that effect the mind too? That's another kind of fabrication, verbal fabrication. They're all right here. It's not that nothing is going on, it's just that we've gotten so used to the way things are going on that we don't really notice it. It's like living in a city. You turn on the tap and there's water. You turn on the switch and there's electricity. You turn on the heat and there's heat. You hardly give it any thought. Nothing's happening.

But then if you start exploring, exactly how does water get to your tap in the city? Where does it come from? What processes does it go through? How does electricity get to where you are? What's the source of the heat in your building? Start thinking about things and you realize there are a lot of people working just to keep things going as if nothing were happening. Well, it's the same in the body. There's a lot of fabrication going on. The breath is fabricating the way you sense your body from the inside, what's called proprioception: your sense of the body as you feel it from within.

Sitting here, you know where your hand is. You know where there's tension in the different parts of the body. It's different from the sense of touch. It's your internal sense of the body, what the texts call your sense of form. And how do you create pleasure there? The Buddha gives you ways of analyzing. He says there are warm sensations, liquid sensations, breath sensations, solid sensations. When things seem out of balance, what's wrong? Is it too warm? Is there too much breath energy? Is there too little breath energy? Are things feeling too heavy?

What happens if you use the perception of extra warmth? There is warmth in different parts of your body. If you're feeling cold, find warmer spots and see if you can maximize them. Or if the breath isn't flowing well, what can you do to straighten that out, to comb out all the tangles in the breath energy?

You begin to see that there's a lot going on here. This is precisely what the Buddha has you look at, fabrications. This is where insights are going to arise. And where do they arise? They arise right here. As you get to know this process of fabrication really distinctly and really subtly, you begin to realize how the mind fabricates other things as well, particularly your emotions.

Because emotions are made out of these same things. There's the way the energy flows in your body when you're angry, as opposed to the way it flows when

you're feeling lust, or how it flows when you're feeling fear. There are the thoughts that contribute to that particular emotion. The way you evaluate the situation around you: That's contributing to your emotion. And the feelings and perceptions they're all there, creating this emotion that you've got going. It seems to happen all on its own, but when you get more sensitive to the processes, you can begin to see how much you're adding to the situation that you don't really have to add. Particularly, you see how stress and how much emotional pain and physical discomfort you're creating around this emotion. And you can ask yourself: Is it worth it? Is this actually helping me? Or is it getting in the way?

The body may be wired to fight, but is this a good time to fight? It may be wired to run away, but is this a good time to run away? It may be wired to feel lustful about things, but is this a good time to feel lust? If you haven't been paying attention, you don't know how to undo these unskillful emotions. But if you get sensitive to the fact that the breath is a contributing factor here, at the very least you can breathe in a way that releases a lot of the tension that's in the body around the fear, the lust, or the anger.

That way, you don't have that physical sense of something in your system you've got to get it out, because you can dissolve it out. Relax your hands. Relax your fingers. Relax the backs of your hands. Relax your feet. Open up those channels. As some of those physical symptoms go away, it's a lot easier to look at the situation and have more of a balanced view of what's actually going on, and what would be a skillful thing to say, as opposed to what you just feel like saying. What would be the skillful thing to do? Is this the right time to act, or is it not?

This is what the Buddha recommends, that you learn how to practice concentration as an important part of the path because it helps you to see things. Part of this is just in getting the mind to settle down and create a sense of ease and refreshment with the breath. At the same time, though, you've got to experiment and to ask questions if you're going to learn about these processes. Then, as the mind is still, when there's a slight bit of disturbance, you sense it quickly.

I was reading the other day someone complaining that they'd read a piece saying that it's important to have strong concentration in your practice, and this person said, "No, my teacher taught me that strong concentration is delusional, because you don't see your defilements. You have to spark your defilements. You have to stir up your defilements to see them." Well, you'll see them, but will you understand them? You understand them by learning how to take them apart, teasing out all the different threads that go into this weaving of a feeling of anger, or weaving of a feeling of lust, or weaving of a feeling of fear. If you can tease them

out, then you can unravel these things. You don't have to be under their power. You become more sensitive.

So the understanding comes from learning how to get the mind under control with a sense of real rapture and refreshment here.

The Buddha didn't say "Just sit here and watch whatever comes up," without giving you a foundation for watching. The foundation comes from that sense of well-being that comes from knowing how to deal with the breath, knowing how to deal with the perceptions and feelings, the thoughts and evaluations that go into creating a pleasurable state of both physical and mental well-being. That way, when that well-being is disturbed, you sense it quickly. You have some idea of where it came from and how you can unravel the disturbance.

Then you learn how to do this continually, making this part of your everyday way of negotiating with the world. As you walk down the street, be sensitive to the breath. Learn how to watch your perceptions. Notice what there is along the street that pulls you out. This is easier to see if you're walking down the street with that sense of fullness. Can you maintain it while you're walking?

This is one of the reasons we do walking meditation: to keep that sense of fullness, refreshment, pleasure going no matter what we do. Try to develop a sense of a steady center. This is where the teachings on heedfulness come in, because the defilements that can make a mess of your life can come at any time.

You may think, "Well, I learned how to deal with that defilement once." You've dealt with it once, but that doesn't mean you're going to be able to deal with it the same way the next time. Defilements have their tricks. You learn one way of dealing with one, and when it comes back again you try the old way of dealing with it, but it doesn't work this time. So there's something new to learn here. That's one thing to remember. The other is just, of course, that there are lapses in mindfulness. You get complacent and *whoops*, there it goes. You forgot.

Or the defilement can come armed to the teeth, saying, "Look, you've been dealing with me all this time and I'm still not going away. I'm invincible. You'll never beat me." Well no, that's not the case at all.

Just look at that thought: It's another perception and it's a very unskillful perception. So here's a perception coming along, coming out of who knows where, but just because it comes into your mind doesn't mean you have to believe it. You have to remember: The mind is like a committee. Some members of the committee like to meditate, and other members of the committee like to do other things. Every member of the committee has his or her own favorite pleasure. So you have to ferret that out as well, because sometimes there are a lot of states of mind that you don't like. You identify yourself with the not liking, and yet

somehow there's something in there that does like it. So you've got to ask yourself, "Okay, what is it? What's the pleasure that comes from this? What am I feeding on when I fall for this state?"

And it's a lot easier to see the feeding habits of the mind—especially the unskillful feeding habits—when you learn how to feed in a more skillful way, when you have a sense of accomplishment and confidence that comes from learning how to deal with the mind, getting it to be still, at least sometimes. So if you've done it in the past, tell yourself, "Let's do it again."

You may be up against a lot of committee members, so it may take some time to ferret out all the different ones and all the different tricks that they play. But they all come down to these three types of fabrication. There's the physical fabrication of the breath energy. There's the verbal fabrication of how you direct your thoughts and evaluate things, to decide what's good, what's bad, what's working, what's not working. Then there are your perceptions and feelings. "Feeling" means feeling-tones of pleasure and pain, or neither pleasure nor pain.

These are the elements that create states of mind that inhabit both the body and the mind. So keep remembering, reminding yourself: It's just these three types of fabrication. This is how concentration helps you gain insight into the mind, first in the process of getting the mind to have a sense of well-being and fullness and stability in the present, then in learning about these factors and about how they go into the construction of your different defilements, so that you can pull them apart, tease out the threads. Particularly when these traitorous perceptions come in, you learn to recognize, "Well, that's just a perception. I don't have to allow it to give power over my decisions." You can counteract it with other perceptions. And then get the breath on your side. Get the feeling-tone of well-being on your side.

At the very least, you find that you can stand firm against that particular defilement. And it's even better when you begin to see, "Oh, here's another thread that you missed the last time. And here's another one."

So there's actually plenty going on. It's just learning how to analyze it, learning how to master these processes so that you can get them on your side—on the side of wanting to develop a path that leads to the end of suffering—rather than just muddling around in your old ways and creating more and more suffering and stress and complaining about it, but not really being able to do anything about it because you don't understand the underlying factors.

That's what this path is all about: to give you the strength and the precision of vision so that you can learn how to withstand the unskillful fabrications and develop the skillful ones in their place. It's all happening right here. It's simply a

matter of learning how to look. If you look from the wrong angle, you won't see anything at all. If you look from the right angle, it's all thrown into relief.