

Do Jhana

October 2, 2012

When the Buddha told his disciples to go meditate, he never said to go do samatha or go do vipassana. He always said, “Go do jhana. Get the mind in right concentration.” And in doing jhana, you develop both samatha and vipassanā—these qualities of mind. They’re not meditation techniques. They’re aspects of the practice of jhana—qualities you need to bring to the practice of jhana and qualities that get developed as you do more jhana. It’s important to keep this point in mind, particularly as you’re focusing on the breath.

The way the Buddha taught breath meditation was designed specifically to develop both samatha and vipassana—a sense of calm and insight—at the same time. The calm comes from staying with the breath. Breathe in. Breathe out. Try to stay with the in-breath all the way in; the out-breath all the way out. Get a sense of what long breathing feels like; what short breathing feels like. Breathe through whichever way feels best. That’s the calming.

The insight comes from spreading awareness to fill the whole body and then, as the Buddha said, calming bodily fabrication. This is why it’s important to know what he means by *fabrication*. It also gives insight into what it means actually to do samatha; do tranquility, or develop tranquility, develop insight. Tranquility is developed by steadying the mind, stilling it, bringing it to unification—in other words, making it one in one spot and keeping it there. Insight comes from looking at things in terms of fabrication, how they’re put together.

The first type of fabrication you want to look at is bodily fabrication, how the breath has an impact on the body. When you breathe in, where do you feel it?—especially when you try to make yourself aware of the whole body. It’s not just at the nose. In fact, it’s sometimes best not to call this breath meditation, but rather breathing meditation. You’re getting a sense of what the breathing feels like. You may want to stir it up a little bit. Breathe deeply. Breathe in a way that gives you a sense of fullness so that you get really sensitive to how the process feels and to the impact it has on the body.

Then the Buddha says to calm it. Make it more refined. You see this as a process and you begin to realize there is an intentional element in how you breathe. Sometimes you’re told, “Don’t direct the breath. Just let the breath come in and out on its own.” Well, the breath is not going to come in and out on its own. The intention to breathe is either conscious or subconscious. To understand it, try to make it as conscious as possible. And the best way to do that is to try to

make it as comfortable as possible. Otherwise, the intentional element takes over and it's not really listening to what the body needs and so it gets uncomfortable. It becomes disagreeable.

To understand what the body needs, you try to listen to it. What feels best? How about deeper? How about more shallow? How about faster? Slower? There's plenty to experiment with. This is how you understand fabrication: through experimentation.

Then you begin to notice the kind of feelings that the breath gives rise to. You also get more sensitive to your perception of the breath, especially when you change it from the perception of air coming in and out through the nose to a perception of energy suffusing the body. Notice which perceptions are most helpful. If you perceive the breath as something you have to pull in or push out through this solid body, it makes it unpleasant.

Hold in mind the perception that the breath is there first. In other words, the energy is what you first notice when you feel the body, and only then do you notice the solidity or other aspects of the body. That means energy comes first. It doesn't have to be pushed through any obstacles because it's already there before the solidity comes. Just holding that perception in mind changes the way you breathe—makes it a lot easier. In this way, you're getting sensitive to what the Buddha calls "mental fabrication," in other words, feelings and perceptions. Those, too, are things you want to calm down to bring the mind a greater sense of steadiness, a greater sense of solidity, a greater sense of freedom.

What you're doing here is working on calming and insight at the same time. Now, you'll notice, as you practice, that the mind is going to lean in one direction or another: either toward calming or toward insight. Sometimes all you want to do is just get it still, still, still—because you need rest. Then when you've rested for enough, the mind gets curious. If it's going to be curious, have it be curious about the concentration itself. What's going on in your concentration? The Buddha gives an analogy of a person standing watching someone who's sitting; or a person sitting watching someone who's lying down. In other words, you're slightly up and above what you're observing. You're observing the mind as it's with the breath. You don't want to pull out of concentration entirely.

Another way you might understand it is like a hand in a glove. When you're really concentrated without much thinking, it's like having your hand all the way into a glove. Then when you pull out of it, you don't pull the glove totally off or the hand totally out of the glove. Pull your hand back a little bit so that you're still in the glove, but not totally snug. That's an analogy for the mind observing the mind watching the breath. See if there's anything in there that's still causing you

any stress at all, either in terms of the breath itself or with the mind's own activities. This is an important principle in the practice: learning how to watch your actions while you're doing them, seeing the motivation that leads to them, seeing the results that come out of them. Look for any unnecessary stress in the process that you're causing. And learn to see connections: "This motivation leads to that kind of action. The action leads to that kind of result."

The questions you ask as you're looking at your actions are the questions of discernment. They replace our other, more normal questions, which are the questions of *papañca*: "Who am I? Where am I? What's the world around me?" Those are actually the questions of hunger because your identity of who you are is what needs to feed, and the world around you is where you look for your food. That's how we normally relate to things. We're looking for things that'll nourish the body; things that'll nourish the mind. We feed off of relationships with other people. We want to feed off of either love or respect or power or status, praise, recognition. We look inside and we feed off our own love for other people. We feed off our greed, aversion, and delusion: There are all kinds of things we feed on. The problem is that we don't really exercise much discretion or discernment in what we eat. Our feeding habits tend to be pretty voracious and haphazard.

What we're trying to do as we get the mind into concentration is give it better food so that it's not so compelled to keep asking the questions of hunger, and we can pull back a little bit and start asking the questions of discernment: "Where are you feeding? Are you feeding well? Are you harming yourself? Are you harming anybody else? What are some of the things that you feed on that you might be better off not feeding on?" Some of the mind's food is like junk food. The more you eat, the hungrier you get. Even though there may be a little bit of satisfaction, you're really doing harm to your system.

The whole purpose of getting the mind really still like this with a sense of well-being is so that you're not so hungry and you can start asking these questions: Where is there stress? Where is there unnecessary stress? You can move the mind into more and more subtle states of stillness so that you can see more subtle forms of feeding. Ultimately, you want to get to the point where the mind is so strong that it doesn't need to feed anymore. You find a happiness that doesn't require feeding. That's where we're headed. But before you can get there, you have to learn how to feed yourself well—and then learn how to watch yourself. This is why exercising your powers of judgment is absolutely necessary to the practice.

All too often you hear, "You don't want to be judging. Just accept whatever comes; whatever goes." Well, you accept these things only to the extent of trying to understand them. Then you pass judgment on them: Are these things really

skillful or not? If they're not skillful, what can you do that's more skillful? That's where the discernment comes in. This is why evaluation is such an important part of that first jhana. You evaluate the breath to make it more comfortable. You evaluate your focus. Where are you focused in the body? At what spot is the focus strongest? Can you maintain that focus and, at the same time, have a sense of the whole body breathing in, the whole body breathing out? Evaluate how you can do that. Learn how to judge your meditation skillfully so that the meditation itself becomes more and more of a skill.

It's in the evaluation that you gain insight. You see cause and effect as they operate, both on the level of the body and the level of the mind. And how do you know cause and effect? You experiment. Try this. Try that. As Ajaan Lee says, you don't really know silver, say, until you've tried melting it and seeing what you can do with it. You can say the same about food. Different kinds of food: You don't really know them until you've tried cooking them. And the same with the mind and the breath: You don't really know them until you've tried to create a sense of good, stable concentration, and then try to make it more stable, and more stable; and more stable. Keep making it more and more still. This requires insight.

You can't just push the mind into stillness, because it's going to rebel. If you just push it, it pushes back. But if you learn to understand cause and effect—how you work with the breath, how you work with perceptions, how you work with your feelings—that's when you really come to understand what's going on in the mind. You understand its feeding habits, its really subtle feeding habits more and more clearly. That's what enables you to get beyond them.

So it's not that you're doing either samatha or vipassana. You're doing jhana. And you develop insight and you develop calm as you do it properly, as you learn how to ask yourself useful questions that deepen the concentration, that deepen the stillness and make your insight sharper. It all works together. You may emphasize one aspect at one time in the practice and another aspect five minutes later or five days later or whatever. But it's all part of a single whole.

Always keep that point in mind.