

## *Skillfully Shaping Your Life*

*January 22, 2014*

Take a few deep in-and-out breaths. When you do that, you've proven a couple of things right there. One is that you do have some control over the breathing. And when we talk about breathing here, it's not so much the air that comes in and out of the lungs. It doesn't come in and out on its own. There's a flow of energy in the body that brings it in and then expels it. That's what you want to look at. Notice where you feel it as you breathe in, as you breathe out, and decide whether you like it. If you don't like deep breathing, you can try more shallow breathing, heavy/light, fast/slow, short/long. Experiment for a while to see what kind of breathing feels best right now.

In doing this, you help to anchor the mind in the present moment. We're here in the present moment not because it's a wonderful moment but because it's an important moment. This is where you're shaping your life.

Just as you can determine the way you breathe, there are lots of other things you can determine in your life. You can determine what you think about, you can determine how you perceive things. You can actually change your feelings. You can work with feelings of pleasure and pain in the body. You do this with the breath or you can look at them in new ways. You find that pain can be less painful, pleasure can be more pleasurable, if you're skilled. If you're not skilled, you can make the pains worse and destroy any potential for pleasure.

This is an important principle. We're not only on the receiving end as we deal with the world. The mind can be very proactive, and we really do shape the way we experience things. This is why training of the mind is so worthwhile. If the amount of pleasure and pain we felt in the world were entirely out of our hands, then there wouldn't be much point in training the mind. But we do shape things. You can sit here for an hour and make yourself miserable. You can sit here for an hour and be totally blissed out just breathing in, breathing out. It's a skill.

And as with any skill, it takes time and it takes your powers of observation, along with some ingenuity to figure out what kind of breathing feels best, what spot in the body is a good place to focus. Get to know how you conceive the breathing process. You have a mental picture of the breath that you carry in mind.

When the Buddha talks about how we shape our experience, he says there are basically three ways. One is simply through the way we breathe. You may have noticed this if you've had an injury. Breathing in certain ways aggravates the injury. Other ways of breathing can soothe it. And it's a good skill to master: getting to

know what kind of breathing is best for the body in different situations. That's one way we shape our experience. It's called bodily fabrication.

Then there's verbal fabrication, which is basically how you talk to yourself. Years back we had a woman come from Los Angeles and meditate with us a couple of times. Then, after a couple of weeks, she brought a friend. We were sitting as a group under the trees. At the end of the meditation, the friend opened her eyes and said, "I've never suffered so much in my life." Just sitting there breathing. The suffering was all in her thinking, all the things she was telling herself.

The Buddha analyzes the way we talk to ourselves in terms of two processes. One is called directed thought, as when you pick up a topic to think about. Then there's evaluation: You think about it, make comments on it, ask questions about it, and make changes. So when you're dealing with the breath, you're thinking about the breath and you're evaluating it. Again, the way you think sometimes depends on your picture of exactly what breathing is, what kinds of breath energy there can be in the body. This is where it's useful to open yourself up to many possibilities.

There are many different levels of breath energy. There's the energy that brings the air in and out of the lungs. There's the energy that flows along the nerves and through the blood vessels. Some of that energy moves in waves along with the in-and-out breath, and other types of energy are not in coordination with the in-and-out breath. Some of them are very still; some of them move around. So there's a lot to explore here.

It's best in the beginning to focus on what you experience easily, what's most obvious, but open your mind to the fact that there are other things going on, too. Breath energy is a whole-body process. Some people even have a sense of breath energy surrounding the body like a magnetic field. And they can work with it. So work with whatever you sense and then evaluate it: Is the breath comfortable? What can you do to make it more comfortable? Pose those questions. Sometimes simply posing the question changes the way you breathe. Other times, you have to experiment. When you get something good, how can you maintain it? And how can you make the most out of it?

Ajaan Lee talks about allowing the sense of ease and pleasure with the breathing to spread through the body: down the spine, out the legs, down the shoulders, through the arms, all through the head. You can think of the breath energy coming in and out of the eyes, the ears, from the back of the neck, down from the top of the head. There are lots of ways you can take advantage of whatever sense of ease and well-being comes from the breathing and maximize it. All that's called verbal fabrication.

Then there's mental fabrication: your perceptions and your feelings. As the Buddha points out, simply focusing on the breath changes the types of feelings you have in the body. Feelings, here, are not so much emotions as they're feelings of pleasure, pain, or neither-pleasure-nor-pain.

Sometimes when you focus on the breath you put too much pressure on it, which creates a feeling of dis-ease. You get irritable. You feel confined. But if you learn how to hover around the breath, you can allow it to flow in a way that's comfortable. In Thai they use the word *prakhawng*, which is the word you use when a parent is helping a child to walk. The child's just beginning to walk, so you don't hold the child because if you hold the child, the child won't get a sense of its own balance. But you've got your hands just a few inches away just in case it falls. That's the kind of attitude you want to have to the breath, to give it a chance to show its stuff, to learn how to flow unimpeded through the body. So simply the way you focus on the breath, the way you pay attention to the breath is going to create feelings, and you want to use that fact to create feelings of well-being.

Then there are the perceptions. These are the mental labels you apply to things: the pictures or words you use to depict things to yourself. In this instance, it's how you picture the breath: where the breath can come in, where the breath goes out, how it flows through the body, which ways of picturing this are most beneficial—in other words, they create a sense of well-being and enable the mind to settle down.

These are the raw materials with which we fashion our experience, and we get hands-on practice with them as we work with the breath. Because once you get sensitive to the way you shape things in your meditation, you catch yourself doing it all the time. You're shaping the way you talk with other people, the way you think about things, how you approach problems. Simply sitting around doing nothing, you're still shaping things in these three different ways: the way you breathe, the way you talk to yourself, and the perceptions and feelings that shape the mind.

So the training of the mind as you do this helps get you sensitive to the way you're doing this in the rest of your life. Then you can start thinking about how you *want* to shape your life. Or if thinking about shaping your life is too big a topic, then you can think about how you want to shape a particular activity. If you find you're shaping it in an unskillful way, you can ask yourself, "Okay, which one of these three is the problem? How am I breathing when I think about it?"

Years back I was involved in a psych experiment where they were trying to get you to overcome fear. They had you think about something that made you really afraid to do it, and they had you break it down into steps that were similar to that

but not quite as daunting. Then you had to visualize yourself doing those things, from the least fearful to the most, and in each case you tried to breathe calmly. That way, you worked yourself up step by step by step, until you could breathe calmly thinking about the most fearful thing. In my case, one of my big fears was playing the piano in front of people. In practicing this method, I found I could overcome that fear. It didn't make me a better piano player, but made me less self-conscious about other people hearing how my playing went.

What this means is that sometimes just the way you breathe around a particular problem can have an impact on your ability to solve the problem. If you notice that your breath is harsh or uncomfortable, stop for a second. Try to breathe through the tension the same way you're learning how to breathe through the tension right here. Then you can ask yourself, "How am I talking to myself about this. What are the terms I'm using? Can I look at it in a different way?"

This is where the ingenuity comes in. You want to look for good examples. If you know somebody who handled problems like this before: How did they handle it? How did they think about it?

If you don't have any good examples you can draw on, try to think of what would be a good example for you to set for others. Try to think about a problem in a way that you can work your way through it. This, of course, gets connected to your perceptions. How do you perceive yourself? How do you perceive the other person? How do you perceive the problem itself and the possibility of a solution?

When you learn how to break things down in this way, you find that you can get a lot more skillful at shaping your own experience and how you deal with difficulties as they come up.

We had this chant just now about aging, illness, and death. Those are the big problems in life. People sometimes complain: "Why is Buddhism so pessimistic? It talks about aging, illness, death, the unattractiveness of the body, suffering, suffering, suffering." Well, it's because the Buddha sees these as problems that can be solved, so he tackles them head on.

It's like a doctor who has the medicine to cure an illness. Suppose he can cure cancer. He'll ask you, "Do you have cancer? If you do, we can deal with it." Doctors who can't cure cancer hedge around trying to find something else to talk about or to diagnose the symptoms as something else. But if you know you have the medicine that works against really difficult things, then you're not afraid to talk about it. And you find that it's best to talk about these things so that you can focus people on their genuine problem.

After all, we are growing older, day by day by day. If you're still relatively young

you don't notice this because the body repairs itself every day. But as you get older, its self-repairing capacity gets less and less powerful. You begin to see how the body just gets worn down all the time. Then there's illness, and finally there's death. The important point is that we can experience these things and yet not have to suffer. The way we shape our understanding of these things can make a huge difference. We can be separated from people we love, from things we like, and we can still learn how not to suffer from that. It's all in how you shape things.

So as we meditate, we're getting practice in shaping things well, breaking things down into the different skills we have available to us, learning how to master those skills and applying them well. That way, instead of shaping a lot of suffering for ourselves, we can learn how to shape a sense of well-being.

I was listening to someone talk the other day talking about how the Buddha's basic teaching is that "to live is to suffer." The Buddha never said that. There is suffering in life, but that's not all of life. There's an end to suffering in life as well. Even if you don't go all the way to the end of suffering, there are many ways of finding relative well-being in life. But it all depends on how you shape things, how you think about things, how you perceive things, how you train your mind in the skills of breathing, in the skills of talking to yourself and then the skills of perceiving and feeling things.,

A lot of these things we don't think of as skills, which is why we don't get the advantages that can come from these processes. This is why we train the mind. After all, there are things outside that are unpleasant and things that are pleasant, and we have the ability to suffer from even the pleasant things if we don't handle them well.

When the Buddha talks about suffering, he basically talks about two kinds. There's the inherent stress in things that arise and pass away and change. That's just the way the world is. But there's also the suffering that comes from our own craving and ignorance, our ignorance in how to fashion things skilfully, because we're so focused on what we *want* that we don't notice what we're *doing*. That kind of suffering and stress can be cured, and we do it through training the mind, by bringing awareness to the process of fabrication, how we shape our experience. It all happens right here.