

Training Wheels

July 10, 2017

Usually when we start the instructions for breath meditation, we start by saying, “Focus on one spot in the body where the breath is most obvious. Allow the breath to become comfortable at that spot.” In some cases, this involves allowing. In other cases, it involves experimenting to see what kind of breathing feels good there. Then, once that spot has become comfortable, you spread that sense of comfort throughout the body. That’s when you expand your awareness of the whole body as well.

But sometimes if you focus on one spot, it makes the breath smaller and smaller, and your awareness gets smaller and smaller, which is not good. So in cases like that, you can start out by being aware of the whole body, consciously making yourself aware of everything from the head down to the feet, the feet up to the head. And then you breathe, sensitive to the breathing process in the context of that larger body awareness. See if that opens up the breath, makes it more refreshing, more satisfying.

Sometimes you hear the question, “Why focus on the breath? When you die, you’re going to have to leave the breath. Why don’t you focus on something that goes with you when you die, like your awareness?” Actually, all of the things that you can concentrate on—body, feelings, mind, mental qualities—are things that you’re ultimately going to have to abandon anyhow. We focus on any of these, as we focus on the breath, primarily as training wheels, things that we’re going to have to get to know, but ultimately, we’re going to have to go past. And when you focus on the breath, it’s not that you’re aware only of the breath. Feelings, mind states, and mental qualities will be there as well. So you’re learning about all of them at the same time.

As the Buddha said, you focus on these things as your establishing of mindfulness, or as your frames of reference, for the sake of comprehending them and for the sake of overcoming desire for them. That’s what concentration is all about: You put all these things together and learn how to stay with them; you stay with them so that you comprehend them; you comprehend them so that you can go beyond your desire for them; then you let them all go. That’s how you gain release.

But you don’t let them all go from the start. After all, they are your path, and you try to make them as good a path as possible. Bring them all together in a way that feels balanced, strong, and refreshing, so that the mind will like to stay here. Because the real pleasure that comes from concentration is not so much pleasure from the body, or from the physical feelings. It’s the pleasure of having the mind settle down and be still and have some peace inside.

The pleasure also comes from having some control over what the mind is going to do, because these topics of concentration, the component factors of concentration, are also the things that we have cravings for—craving for the body; craving for feelings; craving for certain

mind states—and the Buddha compares craving to a river. He says there's no river at all like craving, because, unlike rivers, the currents of craving can flow every which way. Rivers tend to flow in only one direction. But craving can flow in every direction, and if you have no control over it, it can take you anywhere at all.

The Buddha's explanation of how beings pass on is like a fire going from one house to another. In the space between the houses, the fire is sustained by the wind. In the same way, as one being goes from one life to the next, it's sustained by craving in the interim. The craving flows out and, if you have no control over it, it could take you anywhere at all.

So when you're practicing concentration, you're gaining some control. When the mind goes to the body, feelings, mind, or mental qualities, it goes where you want it to. It develops good mental qualities, because in the list of mental qualities that the Buddha gives in his description of the establishings of mindfulness, there are those that are clearly good and bad, such as the factors for awakening and the hindrances, and then there are others that are more neutral, but turn bad by the way we interact with them. You've got the aggregates, which are neutral, but then they become part of suffering when they become clinging-aggregates. You've got the sense media, which are neutral, too, but they become the topic for suffering when you start developing fetters around what you see and hear and smell and taste; or simply fetters around the fact that you like having these senses to begin with. So there are good and bad in all of these things.

You want to learn how to gain some control over these things so that the mind goes only for the good, only for the skillful ones. And you want to do that while you're still healthy and alert, while your mind is still clear, so that going for the good becomes second nature. For most of us, second nature has nothing to do with control at all. The mind just flows any way it wants to go. As death approaches and your faculties get restricted, your mind is rarely at top form, so you fall back on old habits. So in the practice of concentration, we're trying to develop good habits to have something good to fall back on.

You bring the breath, which is part of the body, together with the mind. And you try to fit them together in such a way that there's a sense of well-being. The mind feels good with the breath and doesn't put too much pressure on the breath, because what you want in a state of concentration is awareness filling the body; breath filling the body; a feeling of ease filling the body. You bring these things together so that they fill one another. And how do you do that? You do that with the mental qualities of the factors for awakening; the mental qualities of the path. So you've got all four frames of reference right here. And, as Ajaan Lee would often say, you try to make them four-in-one. So right where the breath is, there's a feeling of ease. Right where there's the feeling of ease in the breath, there's your mind. And it's sustained by all of the good factors in the factors for awakening; the good qualities of the path.

In the beginning, this requires some adjustment. This is what directed thought and evaluation are all about. When in the first jhana, you've still got to do some thinking. You're trying to get these things to come together in a way that feels right. Once there's a sense of well-

being and refreshment, you let it spread so that it suffuses the body. Then when things come together just right, that's when the mind can drop the directed thought and evaluation, and just be one. All these things come together and feel like they're one: your awareness and the feeling and the breath. As they become one, it's like taking a bottle of oil and vinegar, or a bottle of oil and water, that has been shaken up, and you let it settle down and be still. And as the contents of the bottle settle down, they begin to separate out.

And it's the same with your awareness and the breath and the feeling. You begin to see that they really are separate things. The body has to do with the elements of earth, water, wind, and fire—or, as we would say in the West, the properties of solidity, liquidity, energy, and warmth. Feelings are none of those things. There's pleasure and pain that can come from these things, but the feeling itself is something different. And then the awareness of the feeling is something separate from the feeling. When these things are still together for a while, you can begin to see them separate out.

As you go from one level of concentration to deeper and deeper levels, these things begin to separate out very clearly. When you get to the fourth jhana, the breath grows still. Then you can move from that to a state where there's no sense of the body at all. There's just a large sense of space and awareness of the space. Then the perception of space falls away, and you're left with the awareness. Your perception of the oneness of the awareness falls away and you're left with nothingness. And so you move up by allowing these things to separate out.

Once you've seen them separate out in this way, you don't feel so overwhelmed, say, by pain when it comes, because you realize that the pain is one thing, the awareness is something else, and the body is something else. There's a lot to explore just in this one issue of how these three things, even when they're right together, are different. And—seeing that they're different, seeing that they're separate in this way—puts you in a better position of control. That way, regardless of what the pain is, or what the state of the body is, the awareness can still be clear.

Then, as the Buddha said, even that is something you want to go beyond. He said all of these things are dhammas. They're phenomena. We want to go to beyond phenomena. But before that point, at the very least, you want to have some control over the phenomena. You want to have a sense of direction and a sense that you can actually go in the direction you want.

These are some of the skills we develop as we meditate: focused on the breath, focused on feelings and the awareness. As I said, these are training wheels, things that ultimately you're going to have to go past. But you can't go past them until you've mastered them. And you can't master them until you've spent a lot of time with them, a lot of time bringing them together.

So take advantage of this time right now, when you can settle down with just these things with no other concerns, no other worries. The skill of gaining some control here so that the currents of your craving don't go flowing off in every which way and instead start flowing in the direction you want them to go: That's a skill you need to master. Then, once they've taken you where you want to go, you can put them aside with a sense of appreciation.

Think of that image of the person crossing over the river with a raft. As the Buddha said, when you're on the river, you have to hold onto the raft and make an effort. When you get to the other side, though, you can put the raft aside. You don't have to carry it with you. But even then, you do have a sense of appreciation for the raft. Even arahants, after they've gained awakening, continue practicing mindfulness, focused on the body, feelings, mind, and mental qualities. Their relationship, though, is different. It's said that they focus on these things disjoined from them. And the pleasant abiding that they have is not so much pleasure in the body or feelings. It's pleasure in the freedom.