

2006-11-06 Back to Basics: The Breath

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SPEAKERS

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I was thinking that the last few weeks of my talks here, a little bit abstract, perhaps, or lofty. And so it's always good to go back to basics. So I thought today could be a back to basics. And the basics that I want to explore is breath, breathing. And to give you a sense, perhaps, of how meaningful the breath could be, I'd like to do say a few things and do an exercise with you. There was a man who came to your game to the monastery and he was very idealistic and very scholarly and sure, your great promise as a practitioner, but then he seems to get bogged down in the monasteries library and whenever Anybody looked for him he's always in the library in the books, great big fat books and Buddhist philosophy and psychology and all of it. And finally, the abbot just was beside himself as frustration on this monkey just always looking in books. So the abbot, finally a lock the library and, and the monk was quite flustered, once they have it, what's going on? And the abbot said, there's only one book. You need to study. Only one book you need to rely on. And that's the book of your own breathing. Study your breath, and everything else will be revealed to you. Pretty neat. It's not a traditional story. I just made it up. However the Buddha said this is what he made up. Oh monks. mindfulness of breathing, when developed and repeated and repeatedly practiced, is a great fruit of great benefit. mindfulness of breathing when developed and repeatedly practiced, perfects the four foundations of mindfulness. The four foundations of mindfulness develop the repeatedly practice perfect, the seven factors of awakening. The seven factors of awakening developed and repeatedly practice perfect clear vision and liberation. So begins with the breath. It is not uncommon for Buddhist teachers who say that everything you need to learn in Buddhism can be discovered through the breath. Take breath from All the way to enlightenment when I was in Japan, Zen teacher I said, I had insisted that mindful sleep breathing meditation in the breath could lead a person to liberation. Now, for the uninitiated, the breath can seem very boring and dull and perplexing. Why in the world with such a grand lofty religion, like Buddhism, which has libraries filled with wonderfully profound books, why would it encourage you to focus on the breath as if the breath is the most important thing you can learn the most important things you can pay attention to where it's going, the path can unfold when you engage with the breathing. And there's probably many, many answers to that question. But I'd like

to offer a few, two primary ideas today about some of the value of the breath, breath meditation. One is that if you think about awareness, or attention as being a precious resource, if you think of awareness as being perhaps food, it matters where that food, what that food is fed to. So if you spend your days thinking about the latest and greatest electronic gadget that you can buy, and that's all you ever think about, then you're feeding a certain kind of obsession. you're feeding certain kind of mindsets and kind of orientation. If you're always thinking about sex, you're feeding a certain orientation. If your awareness is always going into fear, anxiety, you're actually feeding the anxiety with this with this food of awareness of attention. Where we place our attention is consequential. And so in Buddhist practice, there's some emphasis on choosing where you put your attention. So you Take this wonderful food and you feed it in places where it's useful to feed, to have some choice about what you do with it. And there's a whole wide range of choices you have, but of healthy places to put it, compared to the unhealthy places that people often commonly will put it. So, the breath is one of those places you can pour your food of awareness into the breathing. Why is it that's a healthy place to put your attention? One of the reasons is that the breath is healthier than most of the alternatives. The way that the untrained mind goes about this busyness often is not so healthy. Buddhism, Buddhism would say that the untrained mind person who kind of ever encountered any kind of attempt to develop themselves is suffering from addiction. And we're all addicts and we can have you know, I am He's really thinkers anonymous. You know? So probably, you know, some of you this evening, realize that you've come to the right place. I'm Gil, I'm recovering thinker. There's another one. Yeah. Let's have some testimonials here.

Don't Don't do it, don't do it.

And some of us can't even afford even one thought because it just leads to another. But, seriously, there's a way in which the mind has certain addictive, obsessive quality to it. We're kind of you know, it's very hard sometimes to get off the train of our thinking. And because we can't get off of it, the fruit of attention goes in there and offerings are fueling that process. Sometimes it's relatively innocent. Sometimes it's literally deadly, that kind of way with the fork, we're feeding with our attention to kind of preoccupations, concerns of the mind. You know, sometimes we can get lost in anger. And people can get kind of spin out of control with their anger, just thinking, thinking, thinking about it. I'm amazed how I can be sitting peacefully minding my own business and meditating. Nothing changed as far as I can tell, in the immediate outer world that I'm paying attention to. And my emotions can do a whole somersault inside of me. You know, nothing's happened. And, you know, I create this whole universe of thoughts and ideas and images and memories and stuff. And then I react and respond to it. And so sometimes it can be it can really get out of hand, that whole inner mental world. So when we bring the attention to the breath, and focus on the breath, we're actually Putting the attention in a different place where the normal obsessions are. And we stop feeding the obsessions. And we put the put the attention someplace else. And one of the reasons why focusing the breath can be calming, is because we stopped feeding the usual preoccupations of the mind. And if it's not fed, it'll quiet down or atrophy or kind of fall away after a while. And sometimes I've done mindfulness of my thinking. It's very interesting to do that. And it's all finished because at some point for me, it settles down after a while.

But I find that if I want my thoughts to settle out quicker and more effective ways to do it, is not to focus on my thinking, but rather to ignore them and just focus on the breath and the more I can pour my attention on The breath kind of fill my experience with the breath, fulfill the attention with just breathing. So breathing becomes the whole universe. There's very little space in my left to think or it's very low fuel or food left in the mind to think. And then my mind settles down becomes quite spacious and expansive. And it's quite a wonderful thing. So one of the functions of the breath is to pull us away from the usual tracks the mind is going on, which are maybe not so helpful in places or different track. So something different can happen. Another way of saying this, perhaps which is maybe a little bit nicer way of saying it is the breath helps us to get out of our own way. You know, too many cooks in the kitchen spoil the soup. Too many minds in your mind spoil the soup as well. And if you so you get out of your own way. Because what that means is that Everything that bothers us is there, because we're fueling it, we're feeding it. Nothing else, there's not anything that bothers us if we think because, you know, if we're bothered by the traffic signs, the noise out here with traffic noise is not going to go away, right. But the being bothered is fueled by how we relate to that traffic sound. Our, our suffering our frustrations or inner mental problems can be traced to a particular way which we use our mind now to the external world. And so if we can learn how to get out of the way, and not keep fueling the unhealthy patterns in the mind, the unhealthy patterns of the mind will actually unravel themselves. We don't have to fix them. We don't have to solve them. We don't have to understand the They're what they're all about. Sometimes it's enough just to kind of get out of their way, and things will just fall away. So, having said all that, let's try it. And let's do it exercise around breath, breathing. And then afterwards, you can tell me tell us a little bit what your experience was like. majestic, close your eyes. Take a moment here is a few moments to feel your body. Feel your body against the floor, or chair, cushion.

If possible, see if you can get a three dimensional sense of your body, global sense of your body. Rising up out of the chair. You're pushing If possible, see thing. establish an inner sense of ease with your body being at ease with your body. With a global experience with your body, feeling your front of your body, the back of your body, the sides. Take a few long, slow, deep breaths. Feel what happens to your body, stretching expanding as you breathe in deeply and feel what it's like to exhale, the contraction the body breathing deeply feel in all directions front and back and sideways. slowly let your attention that your breath returned to normal with the normal breath or approximately normal breath Where is it? You feel the breathing in your body where clearest what parts of your body are activated as you breathe. Someone who's going to explore a cave in the dark, we put their hands up, maybe feel their way along the walls, feeling and sensing your way. The same way with your attention, feel your way inside your bodies, the purpose of the bodies a cave can feel all the different places that get activated as you breathe. rib cage spans and contracts diaphragm moves. The belly lifts the shoulders lift and fall. The back rib cage the size of the rib cage. There might be subtle movements in your spine corresponding with breathing What part of your body is the breathing most pronounced. Chest to the belly diaphragm Perhaps in your nose, your nostrils as the air goes in and out. See if you can set yourself at ease. Easy with how you are explore breathing. And notice how the experience of breathing in is a different experience than breathing out. Notice how they're different As you feel the

difference between the inhalation and exhalation is one of them longer than the other. Are they of equal length? Is your breathing seemed labored, or is it easy? Is it light or heavy? fast or slow is your breathing pleasant or unpleasant. In a moment I'll say start. Now, for a minute or so stop. And in that minute you count to see how many times you breathe. How many inhalations you take in a minute. Go ahead and start Little bit longer with your breathing here. And now, see if you can make small adjustments in the way you're breathing. See if you can make breathing more enjoyable, more pleasant. Maybe by breathing in different parts of your body. Breathing, creating more fully. New by letting go more fully as you exhale doesn't have to be dramatic. See if you can make yourself enjoy a pleasant to breathe Notice what's happening in your mind, notice if you're have any thoughts or attitudes or feelings. They're making it difficult to be with your breathing. Maybe not notice what's going on in your mind. If you can, each time you exhale see if the exhale can somehow settle the mind quieted to that. Empty it. Each time you exhale you're emptying the mind of its concerns and thoughts. The awareness which knows your breathing has no location. The awareness that knows your breathing has no boundaries to it. The awareness which knows your breathing has no movement in it. Then you can take a few long slow deep breaths, and this meditation feel your body and when you're ready you can open your eyes. So from the experience of meditation, guided meditation What would some of you say is the value of focusing on the breath? And if you had an unpleasant time, that was difficult for you or unpleasant, like suggest there's value there too. So what's what's the value? What kind of value? Could you see? Are you to it or experience or that kind of focus on the breath? Was the beginning there was a lessening of as part of thought. So what I was saying earlier, if you kind of take the food and feed it into your breath, there's not much food left for your thinking. Someone else? Yeah.

For me, it's like knowing where that zero point, you know, and being able to being able to experience that zero point and know what that feels like. So then when you start moving away from zero, from center, you start to be more aware of what's going on.

Great. So, zero point or even just a breath itself, trying to hold the focus on the breath. can even if you're unsuccessful at it can really highlight what's going on in the mind to teach you a lot about the mind. And this is something I like to emphasize a lot is that if you try to do breath meditation, It works even when it doesn't work. Because if it doesn't work because you can't stay with the breath, just the attempt to try to stay with it shows you how under control your mind is, shows you how fast the mind is moving shows it to concert with what's going on in the mind. And it's quite easy to kind of go through life and kind of be invisible what's really what really thinking or what's the momentum of the mind really is how turns up visitors or something. If you tried to keep the mind still, you'll see Oh, I have no idea the mind was that concerned with something that busy or agitated or something?

I am curious what the Theravada tradition thinks about using pranayama exercises to help you like when either the mind is does too Really, and you, you can't really stay on the breath for long periods of time, right? Or you're too tense, or you're too sluggish. And so I know that there are exercises that can help you break that enough. So that the rate of coming back to the breath is actually not bad,

right? So the question is what, what is the Terreblanche vision say about using different breathing exercises to help you as an antidote to help in different kinds of situations? Right. And it really depends on the teacher and teacher, the Buddhist teacher did some teachers are kind of purists. And you're not supposed to do anything except just be diligently mindful. And let things be just kind of practicing kind of letting be kind of mode. And and, and just keep being mindful and explore that way. Be present. That way. And in some teachers have a whole big repertoire of skillful means that they're ready to teach you. So you find a range. And so for example, Thanissaro Bikkhu comes here, sometimes he has a, he has a whole bunch of things in his toolkit, things he'll tell you to do with your breath, if you'd like if you're, if you're really tired. One thing you can do is kind of emphasize the breath, or have your breath which he calls the breath energy go upward and kind of up up up in your body. If you're really agitated, you have the breath energy kind of go down, damage your legs and your feet and settle it. So there's, and then the teachers I practice was in Burma. They didn't want us to do any tinkering or any kind of adjusting at all. They just wanted us to be impeccably present for what was there, and it was hard to be present because of the mind was agitated. Then we just had to do our very best try to be present for that and it would That was very valuable just to do that, and, and some of their attitude was that if you're trying to bring an antidote in, you're actually trying to change what is there, rather than be present for what it is, you're trying to change what is. And so you find a range, then generally, yeah, but generally what you don't find in in Theravada Buddhism is you don't find a big emphasis on pranayama or breath exercises. Any kind of breath or exercise is kind of intentional breathing is an intentional way. Unless occasionally, it's a particular antidote for a particular state. Like in yoga, sometimes you've got, you know, to yoga studios and meditation classes. Intentional phenomenon is not there for a particular language or just, it's a good exercise for the internet tradition. So I'm not I'm not familiar with Theravada Buddhism of people doing, you know, just doing exercises like that, unless it's an antidote. Someone else want to bring something up? Maybe the last one for the evening? Yes.

What I noticed is, as the mind starts to quiet,

subconscious images start to surface

an image from a dream or childhood experience or something like that, in this case. Those were positive images, I can see they could just easily be not positive, but I'm wondering what the proper approach is to dealing with as the mind quiets more and more, do these subconscious images also stop popping up or what is the if there's a proper approach to dealing with

I think the when you ask a question like that, what's the proper? What's proper? You have to also you have to also first decide, what's the aim? What's the purpose, because proper doesn't make any sense unless you have a purpose or have an aim or direction you're going, you know, purpose you're trying to fulfill. So it depends what your purposes what you're trying to do in meditation. Traditionally, in

vipassana practice, the emphasis would be, don't do anything with those images, but they certainly can arise and sometimes deep states of meditation, very interesting creative images kind of bubble up. We don't do anything with them, but rather just know that they're just had this very clear awareness. Oh, seeing seeing seeing is happening. Other times, there might be other reasons why you might actually want to take up the images and really get into them. So for example, if a recurring image appears it's frightening or recurring image which bothers us keeps coming up over and over again. Or you feel like you're just gonna get blocked in some way in your spiritual growth, that it might be interesting to actually get into the image and try to get to the symbols of it or the feelings of it or really kind of explore what's going on in some deeper way. In our tradition of vipassana tradition, there's a particular instructions they're given if, but for greens, the greens will be like that, right? So people often ask me, what should I do with my dreams. There's a lot of interesting things you can do with dreams. But if what you're doing is if your purpose and what you're trying to do is only vipassana practice, which sometimes it's like on a retreat, that's what you want to do. Because what you're supposed to do just do that. Then the personal way of dealing with dreams is they're really powerful dream wakes you up, you wake up and you remember something really has an impact and the dream really seems significant. Then, just sit up in your bed and meditate in your bed. And don't meditate on the image or don't image on the neck. content of the dream, but rather meditate on the emotion or tone that's been left over from having the dream. So if it's a nightmare, you might feel fear. If you feel you know, if you had some wonderful, if you won the lottery, then you would feel the joy. And so you kind of go into the emotional tone that might be lingering from having a dream. And you can use that as the entryway to go into something because then you're staying with what's present, you know, the analyzing, but it can go quite, you know, you can go quite far. That way. If you go into the symbolism of it, the meaning of it. You may or may not. You know, it's easy to find what's interesting, if you stay with what's happening with it with emotions in the body, the body, the body is always accurate bodies, not interpretation, emotions are not in themselves and an interpretation. So if you go into the body into the emotions, around the dream, it tends, it can sometimes go very deep, very quickly. I don't know if that was helpful, but

so

the breath is this is the time of the Buddha, in Buddhism, as considered one of the deep primary meditation practices, and I was introduced to it through the Zen tradition, which arose many centuries after the Buddha. And as more and more studied Buddhism, I find that he is just kind of prevalent all through the kind of all the all different forms of Buddhism I've studied, the breath has really been tremendous emphasis. And I find the more I practice, I've been doing the breath meditation now for over 30 years. And rather than getting bored with it, after all the time, because Gee, how many times can you go down the same street? I actually, I actually find it to be more and more interesting, the more I do it, and, and a lot of that interest at some point is Not the breath per se, not the breathing per se. But rather it's the mind states that get cultivated to rise and develop the state of the mind that that unfolds in relationship to staying with the breath. So at some point, rather than focus, some point, you go into the breath and enter the breath. And then at some point, it opens up again to a bigger world.

That is the breath, the breath itself opens up to a bigger world, bigger world, Nevada, a bigger world in the emotional life, and also a bigger world in the mind, until the mind itself becomes as you're staying with the breath. The mind itself becomes a very fascinating and very enjoyable field of study your area of development, and the mind itself at some point, begins to lose. Maybe we don't lose our boundaries, but the mind itself the awareness itself, loses its boundaries, loses its location loses its agitation loses its its suffering and that's nice. So I hope you I hope that this work does a little cheerleading rally. Stay with your breath. Thank you