

Thanissaro Bhikkhu
Week 1, Working and Playing with the Breath
Understanding the Breath
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Hello. Welcome to this month's Tricycle Retreat. The theme of the retreat is working and playing with the breath. We'll be approaching the breath in a proactive way, adjusting the way you breathe, adjusting the way you understand the breath energies in the body, as we're developing a good, solid center in the mind, both to develop calm and also to provide a foundation for gaining insight. We say that it's playing with the breath, because we're going to be working on how to enjoy being with a breath and learning how to make the breath sensations in the body comfortable so it is a pleasant place to stay, and an engaging process.

You're working basically with an energy of life—what keeps your body and mind together. And so it's fascinating to learn how the breath energy can have an impact, both on the body and on the mind, and how you can use that impact for the results that you desire. Working with the breath is basically focusing. The fact that we're doing it for a serious purpose is to give the mind a good, solid basis where it can settle down and can gain insight into the workings of the mind so that you can start solving some of the problems of the mind.

The retreat is going to be divided into four segments. This first segment is based on the doing of the practice—in other words, how to focus on the breath—how to understand the breath in a way that you can settle down and be at ease with it. In the next two segments we will be focusing on maintaining concentration. The second week is going to be focusing on maintaining concentration while you're in sitting meditation; the third week we'll be focusing on maintaining a sense of calm center that you can use as you go through daily life. The fourth segment is going to be focusing on taking these skills and putting them to use.

This way of dividing up the material is based on an observation my teacher once made, which is that when you're practicing concentration, there're basically three skills: first is learning how to do it; second is learning how to maintain it; and the third is learning how to put it to use. There is going to be some overlap, particularly between the maintaining and putting to use, because one of the best ways of giving yourself motivation to maintain concentration is seeing that it does have a practical use. It does serve many purposes as you go to do your formal meditation and as you go through daily life. The actual instructions that we're going to be focusing on are on a separate audio file, the guided

meditation, and you'll be able to access that on the Tricycle Web site. If you'd like to do some additional reading to go along with the retreat, there's a book *With Each and Every Breath*, which is available also on the Tricycle Web site or on DharmaTalks.org.

For this week, we'll be focusing on the doing, as I said, and there are few things you want to keep in mind first before you approach the actual practice. Ask, why you want to do a proactive sort of meditation? After all, meditation is supposed to be about seeing things as they are. Well, as the Buddha pointed out, the reason we suffer is because of the way we shape our experience, and we shape our experience through ignorance. That's what leads to suffering. There is only one aspect of experience, which is not shaped by what he calls the process of fabrication, and that's nirvana, because nirvana cannot be used for anything. The path has to be a path of fabrication. In other words, there are things you have to do, and intentions that you have to develop, but you have to do it with knowledge—this is what makes it different from the ordinary way in which you shape your experience.

There are three types of fabrication that he discussed: bodily, verbal and mental. Bodily fabrication is the in-and-out breath. It's because the breath shapes your experience of the body. It is your primary experience of the body. We tend to think of the breath as something that comes in and out of the solid body that we're already experiencing, but if it weren't for the breath, we wouldn't be able to experience the solid body at all. So, physical fabrication or bodily fabrication is the breath itself. It's one of the few processes in the body that can be either automatic or willed, and we're going to be focusing on how you can use the willed aspect of the breath in order to help develop concentration and a basis for insight.

The second form of fabrication is verbal fabrication, and the technical term for this is directive thought and evaluation. Directive thought is when you focus on a particular topic, and the evaluation is the comments you make to yourself about it. Verbal fabrication is essentially the way you talk to yourself, so we're going to be using the way you talk to yourself as part of the meditation, learning how to do it with knowledge rather than ignorance. Directive thought is the choice of topic to focus on, and evaluation is basically the comments you make on it, the questions you ask, and then the answers you try to come up with. As you're focusing on the breath, you'll be using this, particularly in the first stages of the concentration, in order to settle down and adjust the breath, make it a good place to stay.

The third form of fabrication is what the Buddha called mental fabrication, and this comes in two forms. One is feeling—feelings of pleasure, pain, neither pleasure nor pain—and then the perception. These are the labels that you place on things, the images

you bore in mind or the words that you use in order to label things. The connection between perception and verbal fabrication is the connection between words and sentences. Perceptions are single words. When you see something, bird. The verbal fabrication is that that bird is making a noise; the bird is something that you like; the noise is something that you don't like. That kind of thing.

These things all come together to shape our experience, and we'll be getting practice with the breath meditation in using these processes in a way that can lead to concentration. And in the course of doing that, you're gaining insight into how the mind shapes experiences in other ways. In other words, as you sensitize yourself to this process in meditation, then you begin to see the processes in action as you go through the rest of your life, and this is precisely where the meditation gives some of its most important lessons. When you're dealing with the breath, which is what the topic of this first particular week will be and with understanding the breath, one of the most important things to understand is we're not talking simply about the air coming in and out of the lungs. We're talking about the movement of energy through the body. Breath energy can exist on many levels. The most blatant one is the in-and-out breath. There are more subtle levels of breath energy in the body: the sense of energy that flows through the nerves, a sense of energy that flows through the blood vessels. There're even some areas of what we call still energy in the body.

The ones that you work with are the first two, the in-and-out breath and subtle breath energies that go through the body. Now, when you're working with the breath—in-and-out breath—it's important to keep in mind that there are times that you will want to fiddle with it and other times you'll simply want to watch. There are two attitudes that you have to bring to this. First, you're here to enjoy this. You don't want to be too grim about it. If you start getting grim, you're going to be forcing the breath in ways that are not comfortable at all. You're here to become a connoisseur of your breathing. You want to get more and more sensitive to what you're really like. This is an important aspect of concentration. If you don't like the object of concentration, you're not going to stay there. You're trying to make the breath something that you like, so you have to ask yourself, "What do I really want to feel in my breath?"

The second principle that you have to keep in mind is that you have to be patient. When the Buddha was teaching breath meditation to his son, Rahula, the first thing he told him, even before he mentioned the breath at all, is, "You have to learn how to make your mind like earth." People throw disgusting things on the earth there. It doesn't shrink away. People can pour perfume on the earth. The earth doesn't get excited. "Make your mind like water," he says. People use water to wash away disgusting things and the water doesn't get disgusted; it doesn't get excited when it washes away pleasant things. Same with fire and wind. Fire can burn trash and it's not disgusted by the trash. It can burn

really nice things and it's not excited by the fact that it's getting to burn nice things. The wind can blow trash around; it can blow nice things around, and it doesn't really react either way.

Now, the reason the Buddha is telling his son to make his mind like earth is not to make it into a clod of dirt. It was more to emphasize the fact that as a meditator you want to be observant. You have to really depend on your powers of observation if you're trying to get anywhere and particularly if you're going to be manipulating the breath. You have to be very, very sensitive and you have to be very patient so you're not jumping to conclusions. So, you learn patience. You learn the powers of endurance and you have to bring those to the breath if you're dealing with it.

You'll find, as I mentioned in the guided meditation, there are various ways that you can manipulate the in-and-out breath. You can focus on how long it is. You can breathe in long and not long, in short, out short, in long, out short, in short, out long. Then long and short. (They're, of course, relative terms, so there's a wide range of lengths of breath that you can play with.) And it's particularly with the length of the breath you want to be sensitive too. At what point when you're breathing in does it get constricted or does it feel like you're stuffing too much breath in to the body? At what point when you're breathing out does it feel like you're trying to squeeze out the last little bit of breath energy? Well, that's not going to make a really nice place to stay.

There is a tendency when you're focusing on the breath you try to emphasize the distinction between the in breath and the out breath by putting a little squeeze right between the two, and that's not helpful. You have to think of the breath energy coming in. It reaches a state of relative equilibrium and then it's ready to go out, and it will do that on its own. Something that you might want to make a mental note is to where in the process is the most comfortable spot to stop breathing and where is the most comfortable spot to stop breathing out, similarly with the speed of the breathing. Is it fast, slow, heavy, light, deep or shallow? These are things that you can play with in order to make the breath more comfortable.

Now, there're essentially three ways you can do this. One is to consciously experiment. Tell yourself, "Now I'm going to breath long for a while and see what the results are. Now I'm going to breathe shorter. Now I'm going to breathe deeper. Now I'm going to breathe in a way that's more shallow." And then notice what the results are until you've finally gotten things adjusted to where you like it.

A second way is simply to pose the question in the mind: What kind of breathing would feel good right now? This works especially well after you've been experimenting with

different kinds of breathing to get a sense of what range there is, and you've been able to get the body out of its old programmed ways of breathing. Just pose the question: What breath would feel good now? What breath would feel good now? See how the body responds.

The third way, if these other two methods don't work, is simply to tell yourself, "I'm not going to do the breathing." Let the body breathe on its own and see how it responds. In other words, you put in the minimum amount of interference at that point. So when you're dealing with the breath, you find that there are basically three ways that you can adjust the breath or three attitudes you can bring to adjusting the breath.

When you're dealing with the breath energies in the body, this is something that requires a lot more subtlety. Some people will find that they can get involved in the breath energies and get bollixed up pretty fast, because we're dealing with something that many people are not familiar with. Just the idea that these sensations in the body have anything to do with the breath for many people is something new, so it's important to keep in mind the number-one principle is you're not trying to create anything that's not there. These breath energies are already there. If they weren't there, you'd be paralyzed. You would have no sense of the body, so the fact that you can sense your body from the inside and the fact that you can move the body shows that you already have some sense of the breath energies in the body. Secondly, you want to make sure that you don't force things when we talk about letting the breath go down the back or letting the breath energy go down the front of the body. The word "letting" is important. You're allowing these things to happen. So, instead of trying to push the breath through, it's more a process of seeing where there are already patterns of tension and allowing them to relax. In other words, if you feel there's a sense of blockage in the middle of the back, think of just relaxing the blockage, relaxing the tension, and the breath will flow on its own. If you find yourself forcing the breath, that's a sign you're not really working with the breath; you're working more with the liquid in the body—in other words, the blood flowing in the body—and you're pushing it up against the walls of the blood vessels, and, of course, there's going to be a sense of pressure, which can get very, very unpleasant. To avoid that, you remind yourself, "We're working with energy. Energy can flow through anything," and you keep that perception in mind, which is in mental fabrication. You can see how this process of mental fabrication can help you work with the movements of the breath energy in the body.

A couple of problems may arise as you're working with these energies. One is that you will find that there's a buildup of energy in one part of the body, and that's usually a sign that there's a blockage. Energy has been released in one part of the body but now it's hitting a blockage in another part of the body. A common area is in the middle of the chest; sometimes you feel a sense of pressure in the head, and it's good to know that there

are escape routes for the energy. So when there's a lot of energy in the chest, think of tubes going down your arm and going out through the palms of your hands and allowing the energy to go out in those directions, whatever way that you can visualize yourself that the energy doesn't have to stay bottled up right here, that it can flow out and then out the arms. And just hold that perception in mind. Don't push it out of the arms, because the pushing is what got you into trouble to begin with, so just think about all these channels in the arms opening up, going out through the tips of the fingers, the spaces between the fingers, the palms and the hands. That allows that pressure to relax.

If you have a sense of pressure in the head, it's a sign usually that there's a blockage either in the energy channels coming down the front of the neck or coming down the back. So, in the case of the front, think of when you're breathing and the energy is just coming down the body. There's a tendency some people have when you're breathing to pull the breath in and up, and that carries it up into the head, where it gets stuck. So think of the breath energy going down the front. Hakuin, a Zen master, had an image one time of a ball of butter placed on top of your head, which is allowed to melt and just kind of go down the whole body, and so that helps to relieve a lot of that tension. If you find that there's a blockage in the back of your neck, again, just think of something cutting any of those patterns of tension in the back all the way down the bottom of the spine, and this will allow any buildup of tension or pressure in the head to work its way down the front, down the back. So, that's buildup of pressure.

That's one of the problems you may have as you work with these breath energies. Another one is you find certain knots in the body, some patterns of tension that are almost like calcified hard spots within the body, where the breath cannot flow. And usually these are related either to physical injuries or to emotional trauma or both, and you have to be very careful as you work with these. If you find that trying to breathe right into that particular spot or breathing through that particular spot builds up resistance there, back off a bit and think of breathing around it and that you're going to be very gradually dissolving away the hardened core or the hardened shell around that particular core. Eventually what's going to happen is you'll see that it's often related to the fact that there's one part of your mind that doesn't trust you and is going to hold things and doesn't trust anybody at all. But if you show it that you're going to be tender with it and you're going to be gentle with it, after a while it will begin to open up, and then the pressure will be released. The tension of the tightness will be released.

The third problem that people sometimes have when they're dealing with refined breath energies is the sense of anxiety. The energies are starting to move around in body in ways that they feel are threatening. Again, this may have to do with the fact you may have had a near drowning experience earlier in life or that you may have, again, been a victim of abuse. Any number of things that give a sense that you feel threatened by the movement

of the energy in the body. When that's the case, back off a little bit and just remind yourself, again, that there are these gentle energies. Allow the energies to flow anywhere they want, and after all, this is your breath energy. It's nothing to be afraid of. If you find that you really do feel threatened by energies in certain parts of the body, leave those alone for the time being and work on the energies where you feel more secure, where you feel more at home, and eventually the areas that you feel more anxiety around, again, as with the knots of tension, will begin to release.

So these are some of the thoughts you should keep in mind as you approach the practice of working and playing with the breath. But remember above all that we are *playing* with the breath. This is meant to be enjoyable. Each time you breathe, ask yourself, "What would I really like to feel with this breath? What would I really like to feel with that breath?" The fact that you are manipulating... and "manipulating" is not a bad word here: if you do it skillfully, manipulation is an important part of fabrication. When you're manipulating the breath, you want to do it with sensitivity, but you also want to do it with a sense that this really is engaging. That this is interesting and that you are getting pleasant results. So those are some of the thoughts for this first segment of the retreat. The homework for this week is going to be to listen every day to the audio on breath meditation and to sit with it at least once a day, and if you have any questions, you'll be able to write into the Tricycle website. I do not have Internet access here at the monastery, so what they'll be doing is bundling up a lot of the comments and then sending them on to me, and I'll be responding every three or four days. So, again, welcome to the retreat, and I hope that you enjoy this month of working and playing with the breath.