

Thanissaro Bhikkhu
Week 4, Working and Playing with the Breath
Applying the Breath
July 21, 2013
www.tricycle.com/retreats

Hello. Welcome to the fourth week of our Tricycle Online Retreat, “Working and Playing with the Breath.” The first three weeks we discussed topics of working and playing with the breath in the doing of concentration and in the maintaining of concentration. This last week is going to be devoted to putting those skills to use.

Now, there are various ways we’ve already been discussing as to how you can use these skills in the course of sitting in meditation if you’re dealing with distraction, dealing with pain, dealing with lots of issues that come up in the mind that would interfere with the concentration itself. As you maintain concentration throughout your day, this can be useful in dealing with negative people, negative energies around you, and learning how to maintain a sense of balance as you deal with difficult issues. Here I’d like to focus more specifically on some of the issues that come up with the problems in the mind itself, and I’d like to focus this week on two problems in particular. One is when you’re facing difficult decisions and the other is when you’re dealing with difficult emotions.

In making difficult decisions, concentration is very helpful because it helps you come from a better place when you make the decision. A useful technique when you’re meditating is, if you know that there’s some issue that you’ve got to make a decision on and you’re not sure of how you’re going to deal with it, you pose the question, then try to formulate that question as well as you can, and then you put it aside. Sit down, meditate, and wait until the end of the session; then allow the issue to come back up again.

Now, there’s no guarantee that you will get an immediate answer or if you think through it that you’ll get absolutely the right answer to the question, but you’re coming from a better place. Physically you’re coming from a better place in the sense that you’ve allowed the breath to give you a sense of nourishment. All too often we make our worst decisions based on hunger; we’re really hungry for something. When you can take care of the hunger you realize that that wasn’t really that important at all, or that was not the skillful approach. So you’re taking care of this sense of, “I need an immediate fix of pleasure in order to satisfy myself.” If you can take care of that sense of hunger right away you’re in a much better position to make skillful choices and skillful decisions.

Another area where you might want to use this same technique is if you know that you're going to be facing a difficult situation; you know, people who know how to push your buttons, situations where you've been before and you've gotten into arguments that were really useless and that you regret afterwards. One of the most underused aspects of meditation is the part of Right Effort that deals with learning how to prevent unskillful things from happening. And so, again, you think about the situation that you're focusing on, put it aside, settle down, work with the breath, and then when you come up out of the concentration, try to focus on how you would say something and what the other person would say in response. You're coming from a better place as you're thinking about this, and you can plan an approach that you know, or that you would suspect, would work better if you think about the approaches you've tried in the past that haven't worked. The fact that you're coming from a better place makes it easier to admit, okay, you may have done something unskillful yourself and this is time to change your policies. So that's one of the issues in which you can use the process of working and playing with the breath to help with problems in the mind.

The other is when you're dealing with difficult emotions. Here again the image of the committee is very useful. When an emotion comes on strong it doesn't mean it's necessarily something you really believe. Remember, as the Buddha said, "these things are fabricated, they're put together, and they're just as false as anything else that can be found that comes up in the mind." The fact that they're strong means simply that they've hijacked the breath and that they've been able to use that as an argument for pushing their way into your life. So when you find that that very strong emotion has come up, you can sit down with it and breathe calmly first. That helps to get the breath on your side as opposed to being on the side of the unskillful emotion.

You can then look at how you've been fabricating this emotion. What are the verbal fabrications you've been putting into it? What are the mental fabrications? The verbal fabrications, of course, have to do with the narrative that you've been telling yourself, and you learn to question that narrative. The mental fabrications are the feelings of comfort or discomfort you feel around it. If you've been working a while with the breath so that you've displaced the discomfort of the emotion with a greater sense of comfort, that tends to undercut that problem, allowing you to look at some of the underlying perceptions.

Sometimes you find that when you clear away the current narrative there will be a perception that goes deeper down into, perhaps, your childhood. You also might think of going deeper down into your lizard brain, the part of you that has these images that flash and send their subliminal message up to you. By getting the narrative out of the way it's easier to see those images and to realize that you can replace them. Sometimes people say that when you take away the narrative you get to these basic images or these basic

feelings, and that's your genuine feeling. Remember again, the feeling is fabricated. If it's unskillful, why do you want to continue fabricating it? You've been doing this habitually. You can change your habits. So you learn to replace that one image with another image.

Say, for instance, that you have a strong sense of justified anger about something that someone has done. The Buddha recommends that you stop and consider the fact that you are like a person who is hot, tired, going through the desert, trembling with thirst; you need water. You see a cow's footprint and there's a little bit of water in the cow's footprint. Now, you know if you bent down to scoop it up you'd muddy the water. So what do you do? You get down and you slurp the water up directly from the cow's footprint. If someone were to come along and take a picture of you doing this it wouldn't be that dignified, but what you're doing there is realizing that you have to focus very carefully on that person's goodness. What are the good things that that person has said? What are the good things that that person has done so that you don't paint the person as a totally evil person because you need that person's goodness to nourish your own? If you feel that the whole world is nothing but evil people, you don't have the same energy that can be put into being a good person yourself.

People are mistreating one another all the time, so it doesn't really make any difference if I'm mistreating them. That's an unskillful way of thinking, and your own goodness dies. You've got to learn how to focus on their goodness so the image that you're holding in mind is not so much that you've been victimized by that person, or that you're a helpless little child, or whatever other image you're holding onto... You need the water of their goodness. Otherwise, if you see the whole world as a bunch of son-of-a-bitches, it's like that cartoon in *The New Yorker* where two lady poodles are sitting at a bar and they both have a very mean expression on their faces and one of them is saying, "They're all sons of bitches." If everybody is a son-of-a-bitch, what does that make you? You don't want to be that kind of person.

This helps in giving yourself this image. Giving yourself this mental fabrication helps you start taking apart all these various committee members, because we learned how to see how fabricated they are. Just because you feel an emotion strongly doesn't mean it is your genuine emotion, or that it is something that you really feel. You've been habitually acting this way. Because it's a type of action, because it's a type of fabrication, you can learn how to undo it. Working with the breath gives you a tool for stepping back and feeling that you don't have to get whatever satisfaction you got out of that particular emotion before. What you're trying to do is basically see how you've been feeding on that emotion and why it's an unhealthy way of feeding.

This is one of the most useful sets of questions that you can ask once you breathe through an emotion and you're able to look at it more objectively. The first question is, "okay, why am I feeding on this particular emotion? There's stress in there; what am I getting out of this? What's the pleasure I find here?" Working with the breath helps you not only ask this question but also be ready for the answer when it comes, because many times the answers are things you're not going to want to know about yourself: your unskillful motivations, your unskillful ways of looking at the world, your unskillful expectations about what you want out of the world. Having worked with the breath and developing a sense of well-being, you're in a much better mood to admit to yourself, "oh yes, I do act in that way, I do react in that way, and I don't really want to do that anymore and I don't have to do it anymore."

So, why are you feeding on this? It's related to why you're letting it eat at you; it's because you've been feeding on it. So you want to look at how you've been feeding on it. Working with the breath helps put you in a better position to ask that question and also be ready for the answer when it comes. It also enables you to use the answer in a skillful way as a mature adult. Working with these forms of fabrication, you're becoming more knowledgeable about how you fabricate your experience and you learn how to do it in a more mature and helpful way.

Now, some people sometimes ask, "What you're doing here is basically kind of an insight practice. At what point in the practice are your powers of concentration ready for this?" There are basically two rules of thumb. If it's an issue that you can put aside for the time being in order to further develop your powers of concentration, learn how to put it aside. You want to learn how to look at these emotions as they come up and not try to complete the story or complete the emotion before you put it aside. Let it stay unfinished. Go back to your powers of concentration, but go back to the breath because you need to have that as your retreat mode. Sometimes, some of these issues get very difficult and you find yourself, as you're trying to analyze some emotion—instead of understanding it—actually getting more entangled. So you want to learn how to cut the entanglements and go right back to the breath. It's an important skill to develop.

If the issue, however, is something you've really got to answer right away, you use whatever powers of concentration and discernment you have right now. It's like asking the question, "How strong do you have to be to go down to the gym?" Well, you might be embarrassed to go down to the gym because you're weak and small and everybody else is big, but that doesn't really help you at all. You realize okay, I start out with the small weights, I use whatever strength I have and then I'll develop more strength. It is the same with whatever concentration you have and whatever discernment you have. You learn how to use what you've got and in the course of using it you learn how to strengthen it. So there's no clear line that you're doing either concentration practice or insight practice.

In fact, as you're working with the breath you're developing both qualities at the same time.

The Buddha himself talked about breath meditation in these terms. He said you work on understanding things as processes of fabrication—bodily fabrication, mental fabrication, and verbal fabrication—you learn how to calm those processes. Seeing these things as fabrications and learning how to calm them, you're developing both calm and insight at the same time. These are a couple of the ways in which you can use the process of working and playing with the breath, and the skills that you develop while working and playing with the breath, to deal with issues in the mind.

Dealing with emotions is not simply a question of “I’ve got to get this emotion out of my way so I can live the rest of my life.” As you look into the emotions you begin to see how greed, aversion, and delusion are driving your life in ways that you don’t want them to. All too often a thought comes by and it’s like a person coming up in a car and saying, “Jump in!” In our past ways of dealing with it we would jump right in. Sometimes they don’t even have to invite us; we just jump into the car, and they drive, and only then do we ask them, “Who are you? Where are you going?” When you develop the breath as a foundation you’ve got a good spot to stand on the side of the road. You feel comfortable. You feel secure. If someone comes driving up and offers you a ride you can ask, “Well, who are you? Where are you taking us?” You can look at it and see is this person driving the car someone you can trust or not even though they say they may be taking you to a good place. Look them in the eye and see how that’s greed talking, that’s aversion talking, and that’s delusion talking. I don’t need to go with that person. In this way you learn how to pull yourself out of what they call the defilements of the mind—the things that obscure your awareness, that obscure your clarity, obscure your insight, and obscure the calm of the mind.

Working with emotions in this way is not just for the sake of learning how to live a more comfortable life. You dig deeper and deeper into the processes that have been driving your life so that you can live in a way that’s more skillful. These are some of the uses that come from learning how to develop the process of working with the breath proactively and playing with the breath proactively to help solve some of the problems of the mind.

The homework for this week is to think of an issue in life that you would like an answer to. Post it before you go into meditation and then see what answers you get when you come out. Some answers may come bubbling up immediately as you leave concentration. Others may not, but at least you’re in a better position to start using the powers of concentration to approach some of the issues that you face in day-to-day life, both within the mind and in issues outside, and seeing what kind of results you get.