

Thanissaro Bhikkhu
Week 2, Working and Playing with the Breath
Staying with the Breath
July 8, 2013
www.tricycle.com/retreats

Hello and welcome to Week 2 of the Tricycle Retreat for this month on the topic of Working and Playing with the Breath. Last week, we focused on how you do the practice of working and playing with the breath. This week we're going to focus on how you maintain concentration on the breath by working and playing with it as you sit in meditation.

There are basically three qualities that you want to bring to the process of staying with the breath. If you're going to sit for an hour, how to stay with the breath for an hour. If you're going to sit for 30 minutes, how to stay with the breath for 30 minutes. The three qualities are ardency, alertness, and mindfulness. Now take those in reverse order. Mindfulness is the ability to keep something in mind. In other words, the ability to remind yourself you're going to stay with the breath no matter what. Alertness is watching what's actually happening while you're staying with the breath, being as sensitive as possible to how the breath feels, noticing when the mind is about to wander off and to bring it back quickly if you sense it's about to stray. If you find that you have strayed away from the breath then alertness alerts you to that fact, so that you can come back. Ardency is the quality of trying to do all of this well, and of the three factors, it's the wisdom or discernment factor. After all, insight is a process of seeing cause and effect. You're not simply noting things, but you're seeing how things are connected and the best way to see how things are connected is by handling them in a skillful way. So your desire here to do this skillfully is actually an important part of the practice. The desire is not necessarily bad; in fact, it's an important part of the path.

The book listed it as the first of the basis of success; the qualities that you need to bring to the practice in order to maintain your concentration with skill. It's also an essential effort. So your desire to do this well, the ardency with which you approach this is going to make a huge difference in how well you do it and also it's going to be the fact that it gives you insight into the process as a fabrication that we discussed last time around, since the breath is bodily fabrication. Your directed thought, your evaluation of things, your internal conversation is verbal fabrication and then your feelings of pleasure, pain, neither-pleasure-nor-pain, and your perceptions of things, how you label them are mental fabrication and by trying to bring all these processes together with the breath in a skillful way that is actually how you're going to be developing insight.

Now, in order to maintain your focus on the breath, which is an important basis for gaining insight, you're going to run into the fact that your mind is like a committee and this is an important image to hold in mind because often we feel frustrated by the fact that

you tell yourself to do one thing and all of a sudden you find yourself doing something else. It's good to remember that there are many "yous", many selves, many voices that are in the mind and that it's all the various desires you've had and all the various selves that you've developed around those desires in the past that are going to play a role and that you'll find this frustrating. You make up your mind you're going to sit with the breath and the next thing you know you're planning next week's shopping list or whatever and so you have to remind yourself that maybe the meditating members of the committee are the new ones and you've got to strengthen them.

One, you've got to find qualities of mind that would be friendly to the process of meditation. This is where we talk about meditation, so that the friendly members of the committee, the members who recognize that this would be a good thing can be brought on board. You're going to be developing new aliases and you're also going to be taking the breath and using it as a friend here because as you develop a sense of wellbeing with the breath, both with the in and out breath and with the subtle breath energies in the body, you're developing the immediate sense of gratification and a lot of the very unskillful voices of the committee are the ones who demand gratification right now. They want a sense of pleasure right now and if you have a sense of pleasure to offer to them that will weaken many times their insistence that they can do something else and so you're basically realigning the power balance in your mind as you learn how to work and play with the breath. You're basically using the breath as an ally in doing something skillful rather than as an ally to anger or as an ally to fear which puts you in a much stronger position to deal with qualities, the voices in the mind that are speaking out of anger and the voices in the mind that are speaking out of fear.

So even though it may be frustrating—it's like herding cats in the beginning to get all of these various members of the committee working together—you find that as you begin to develop a sensitivity to the politics and the committee and how you can use the breath and use the process as a verbal and mental fabrication that you've been working with as allies in the meditation, you'll find that you'll be able to get the mind more under control and more able to deal with issues in life that otherwise would bring suffering and stress.

So those are the qualities that you're trying to bring to the practice, the qualities of mindfulness, alertness, and ardency. Some of the issues that you're going to find coming up include things like distractions, drowsiness, pain, and a tendency to space out and I'd like to address each of these briefly in order.

Distraction is when the mind is suddenly finding itself off someplace else and the process of working and playing with the breath helps you in two ways. One is, as I said, it gives you an immediate sense of comfort saying that you're comfortable right here. Why would you want to go off and create a lot of stress for yourself by getting involved in a narrative about what the neighbor just did or what your coworker just did? Secondly as you work with the breath, it gives you something interesting to stay with. One of the big problems or big causes for distraction and concentration and meditation and is when you start

getting bored with a topic. There's nothing there. It's just in out, in out, in out, and I'm out of here and that's what happens, but if you're working with the breath in a way that you find interesting and you find that the mind does tend to go off to another area as you might say right now I'm going to work on the force of my life. This is what's keeping me alive. This is what can help with the health of the body, help with the health of the mind, start pursuing in more detail the various ways that you sense the breath in different parts of the body that you haven't been paying much attention to and you find there's a lot there that you might have missed, some old patterns of tension, some old sort of embodied knots of tension that you can work through. This makes it really interesting to stay with a breath and that'll help distract you from the distraction, put it that way.

If you have issues of drowsiness coming up when you meditate, there are two ways of dealing with that. One is the drowsiness that often comes when the breath starts getting comfortable and your area of awareness starts shrinking down and sometimes it seems to disappear and you fall into an air pocket and you find yourself jerking up again suddenly wondering where you were for that brief second. To prevent this from happening, as soon as the breath is comfortable, you've got to spread your awareness to fill the whole body. By keeping your awareness filling the whole body, you're totally happy in the present moment. The ability of the mind to cope, is it the past or the future, it's like a little tube going off in either direction. It has to get very small before it can go down the tube whereas if you're fully inhabiting the body, your hands are in your hands, your feet are in your feet, your head is in your head, you're fully here. It's harder to shrink down and head off into the other timeframes. Secondly, if you find that you are very still and there's nothing happening and you start getting drowsy, you can start using the process of playing with the breath and seeing if there are more subtle sensations that I haven't been paying attention to now. What's the breath energy like down in my toes and these areas between my toes and other little areas where you may have missed before? This gives the mind work to do to keep it from falling off into drowsiness. So that's the second type of issue that you might be finding working and playing with the breath can be very helpful.

Dealing with pain—pain is one of the most important topics in the meditation and it's often a topic that as people work with it through the course of developing their powers of concentration and insight, can often be one of the main points of ignition for gaining insight. So it's an important issue, again, it's like the committee mind in the beginning. You find it really frustrating to have to deal with this, but as you get to know pain more and more, you find that it's a really important issue to deal with and you gain a lot of insight around it. Working with the breath can help in basically three ways. The first one is that if there's pain in one part of the body, you don't have to focus in that part of the body. Think of it as a prize fighter that you're going to have to fight someday and you're not really ready for that yet and so you have to go off and you have to practice with other fighters that are more on your level of skill. So if you find that there's pain in one part of the body, say down to your knee, focus on other parts of the body where you can

maintain comfortable breath energy and an energy that feels engaging and feels satisfying.

You stay with that—it's the first stage and the ability not to go with the pain just because part of your brain will be screaming at you, is worth teaching oneself. It can be very helpful even in the beginning parts of the practice. You say, "Look that pain is there. The knee is there. I'm over here," or someplace else and learning how to avoid getting pulled into the need to focus on the pain right away is an important skill. Once you have a sense of healthy breath energy in one part of the body, you can think of it spreading from that part down through the pain. Don't stop at the pain. If you stop at the pain, that tends to augment it. Think of the breath energy infiltrating the pain and just going on all the way through. Again, if the pain is in your knee, think of the breath energy going down the leg through the calf and out the feet and this will help to dissolve any pattern of tension that you may build up around the pain. You find often that one of the most difficult parts of the pain is the fact that you've been trying to block it off and prevent it from spreading by creating a little shell of tension around it and that of course adds to the problem, so you're trying to breathe through that. If you allow the pain to simply be there that you're going to breathe through it and in allowing it you develop a sense of not feeling threatened by it. You're no longer afraid to approach it.

This prepares you for the third step which is to actually go into the pain and ask yourself, "What's going on there in the pain? What is the sensation that I keep labeling pain? What happens if I drop the label? Where is the point of most pain right now?" and so instead of feeling victimized by it and trying to run away from it you begin to get more aggressive toward the pain and begin taking on the role of being the aggressor. You're less pained by the pain and there is a lot less mental suffering going around. It's the fact that even though there is some physical pain there, the mind is not suffering because you're investigating, you're trying to comprehend the stress and suffering that you build up around the pain, which is the duty with regard to the first noble truth. So the breath gives you a position. Working with the breath puts you in a position where you can feel secure, you've got healthy breath energy that you can use to help dissolve unnecessary parts of the pain and it can also give you a sense of safe haven that you can go to. If the pain really does get too much for you when you're investigating, you can go back to your parts of the body that you feel comfortable with and so this is another way in which working and playing with the breath really do help in maintaining a sense of being able to be here even with pain, even with distraction, and preventing drowsiness.

The fourth issue that some people run into when they're meditating with the breath is that very quickly they leave the body and go into a more spacious sense of awareness and if you've been reading the text you may have heard the spacious sense of awareness is a more advanced form of concentration. This is progress, something to be proud about. All too often though, there are people who feel uncomfortable with being in the body and this is their way of avoiding any sense of the body. The sense of spacious awareness that

can be developed this way, even though it can be pleasant for a while, is not very stable and if you're always running away from the body then it shows that there are issues that you've got to come back and deal with. So you try to bring yourself back and find, as we said the other time, if there is a part of the body that makes you anxious in the beginning, don't focus there, focus on other parts of the body where you feel more at home. Try to establish a sense of belonging there, that this is my space, and then gradually expand your space to where you feel secure because a lot of the work that's going to be done in understanding the process of fabrication involves not from running away from bodily fabrication and learning to look at it directly and seeing what it is about the energies of the body that you may find threatening.

So these are four problems that you can deal with using the process of working with the breath, i.e. adjusting the breath to strengthen your powers of concentration and insight and playing with the breath that makes the breath a comfortable energy, a pleasant place to be, an enjoyable activity to keep you in the present moment and helps with dealing with distraction, dealing with drowsiness, dealing with pain, and dealing with the tendency to space out and to leave the body. As you're working in this way, you're beginning to, as I say, realign the allegiances within the committee of the mind. You're taking on, what you might say, two new voices and the two new parts of being a meditator. Sometimes you're told that you shouldn't have the identity of being a person who is meditating because that's augmenting the sense of self, but for the time being, you're going to need that. So what you need to do is to remember that you are both a doer, you are doing the meditation and you're also observing the results of your meditation. So as you adjust the breath and you watch for a while to see how this is going and you want to train these two members of the committee because these are going to be the meditating members of the committee. These are going to be the ones that you want to bring more and more in charge of your mind because a skillful doer and a skillful observer, these are the ways in which you're going to develop sensitivity to the process of fabrication and your ability to see when fabrication is causing stress and when fabrication is alleviating stress. So you're developing two important skills through these two types of identity that will really serve you well as you continue into the practice. So by all means use your qualities of ardency and wanting to do this well. Be a good observer and also be a good doer. You will be manipulating the breath and you're going to learn how to do it well and in doing so you're going to develop a lot of insight.

Now for the purpose of carrying the meditation into the rest of your life, there's another quality that you want to develop, which is also to avoid a tendency many people have when they're meditating. So you set yourself an hour to meditate. It's often like a very gradual glide. You start up here and you think, well I've a whole hour and so I'm going to deal with a few issues and then sort of gradually move in with a breath and usually maybe about five or ten minutes before the end of the session, you're with a breath. That's a huge waste of time. What you want to do is be able to locate after a while where your home base is in the body, the place where you feel most comfortable keeping your

attention focused. Even though you're trying to develop a full-body awareness, there's going to be a center at some point. So where is the center where you feel most at ease and also where is the center that lets you know when the least little bit of tension is building up in the breath energy. Often it will be someplace in the central axis of the body. The spot may be right here at the breast bone, maybe in the middle of the chest, maybe right in front of the stomach. You will find that when tension is going to build up in the breath, you will sense it there first and that can be the first place where you breathe through any developing patterns of tension, so you don't give them a chance to spread and take over the rest of the body. Once you locate that spot, as soon as you start breath meditation, go right there and then spread your awareness from that spot and then work with the breath from there. This will be a useful habit to develop, so that you're not just continuing to do this hour-long glide but you'll also be able to carry this out of the meditation.

One of the important skills in leaving meditation is that you don't really leave it, you have the sense of a center that you can then carry with you into the rest of the world.

So those are the points I wanted to discuss this week. The homework for this week will be again to do the breath meditation. If you find that you have a tendency to kind of glide through the hour, like I was saying just now, give yourself short periods of time, five-minute, ten-minute meditation breaks and remind yourself this is it, this is the only chance you've got to meditate for right now, so let's do it well right from the very beginning to develop that ability to focus in on one spot, spread your awareness from there, and be there as quickly as you can because this will then carry into the homework that we have for next week. So I hope you're having a good week working and playing with the breath and we'll meet again next week.