Instructions: Energetic Impact of Breathing

Guy Armstrong · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Guy Armstrong · 50:40

Good morning everyone.

Today we'll continue working with the anchor, and I wanted to say just a few words about choosing an anchor. For most of us the anchor is likely to be the breath, and it generally works well for most experienced meditators. But I wanted to mention a few situations where it might not be the right choice of anchor, and then it's helpful to find another anchor.

As Sally talked about yesterday, anchors are really helpful because they give us a place to come back to when the attention has drifted away from the present moment. When we return to the present, we know where the attention can land next. That steadiness and continued connection to that chosen focus will really help to collect the mind over time. So we really recommend at this point in the retreat choosing an anchor. For most, the breath will work well.

But there are a few situations where the breath may not work so well. One is if it leads to a lot of striving. Striving in this context is where we really crave for a particular meditation outcome and tie it to an idea of how we should be relating to the anchor, the breath, moment by moment. This can put too much intensity, too much force, too much willpower on the connection with the breath. For the mind to settle naturally, there has to be a relaxed relationship with the breath. If there's too much forcing or trying too hard, that will actually block the concentration from deepening. So for those for whom striving becomes a really big aspect of relating to the breath, it can be helpful to choose another focus.

Another area where the contact with the breath may be difficult is if there's been a history of difficulty in breathing. For people who had asthma as a child, connecting with the breathing process itself may feel like a struggle. Breath may still not come easily, and it can remind us of that prior difficulty and bring up a sense of conflict or lack of ease. Then breath may not be the best focus.

Another situation could be if there's been an injury or trauma to the chest or belly—part of the breathing route—earlier, and the connection with the breath brings up memories of the trauma. This came to light when I was interviewing someone on a retreat a couple of years ago. They mentioned that every time they finished an exhale, fear arose for them. So it was uncomfortable paying attention to the breath because at the end of the exhale, fear came up. I thought this was unusual because normally on the exhale, people connect with relaxing.

So I asked them, "Has there ever been an injury or trauma connected with breath?" They said yes, there had been. They were a trombone player, and at one point in their twenties, they were playing the

trombone very enthusiastically, blew out too hard, and one of their lungs collapsed. When the lung collapsed, they couldn't get enough breath. You can imagine if you're in a situation where you can't get breath, there's a kind of panic that comes in. After breathing out, they couldn't get breath back in. So that pattern reestablished itself in attention to the breath. Every time they exhaled, there was a subconscious fear that arose, and they weren't aware of the source of it. They had never connected the difficulty in breathing with that experience when they were younger.

So I said, "Okay, when the fear comes, just be with the fear. It's natural, it will pass." They did that—mindfulness of fear—which eased the problem, and then they could be with the breath quite easily.

So in those instances—really strong striving, prior difficulty with breath, or trauma or injury to an area where the breath is being felt—you may need to look to another anchor.

Sally suggested two possibilities yesterday. One is the body posture. This is a very good anchor in meditation. The sense of ourself in sitting, letting the full attention fill the whole body and getting a sense of the body as a connected unit. There's a section in the Satipatthana where the Buddha says, "Or else one simply is mindful to the extent there is a body." So in that way, just sitting and knowing, "Oh, there is this body"—full awareness of the whole body.

Another good anchor is sounds. In a place like this meditation hall where it's very quiet, sometimes that can bring its own challenge, but then one can become aware of the extent of the silence. Sounds are a very useful anchor for some people because the spaciousness of the whole hearing environment gives a sense of ease and relaxation.

I'll give instructions this morning related to the breath and just mention the other possible anchors as we go.

So beginning in the meditation, please sit comfortably. Have a sense that the posture combines these qualities of uprightness. Feel how the spine can be lengthened.

Sometimes an image that's helpful is imagining a thread from the ceiling to the top of the head. The top of the head is being pulled upward, lengthening the spine. At the same time, there is the pull of gravity, the downward pull of gravity and a heaviness that lets us drop into the sitting base—the hips and legs. So we're moving up toward the sky and settling down to the earth.

Begin with the attention spread throughout the body, feeling that the body posture is pervaded with our attention. This particular form of paying attention could be one of our anchors—mindfulness of the whole body in sitting, mindfulness of the body posture.

As we sit with this sense of ease, allow the attention to open in a wide way, noticing all the sounds that come and go: the sound of my voice, sounds of one another, sounds of the building, any sounds from outside. In this meditation on hearing, let the attention be purely receptive. The attention is resting and

then open to the appearance of any sound in any direction.

Notice we don't have to send the mind out toward a sound. As we simply rest in the center of all the sounds, each sound will be heard spontaneously without any effort, with this receptive attention.

Bring the attention back into the sitting posture, mindful of the whole body in sitting. Let go of any obvious areas of holding—relaxing the forehead, letting the eyes be soft, the jaw not clenched, the shoulders dropped, and the belly soft.

As we let the attention fill the whole body, notice the impact of breathing. Again, rest with the receptive mode of attention. Just feel what happens with an in-breath, wherever it's felt in the body. When breathing in, how does the body experience change? It's not so much that we're watching the breath from above, but rather we're feeling the breathing happen from within.

Let the in-breath feel full. Especially early in the retreat, it can be helpful to have this broad view and notice the energetic quality of breathing. How is an in-breath felt energetically throughout the body? Then bring similar attention to breathing out. What happens in the body when an out-breath takes place? How is that felt throughout the body? Let the out-breath be a full out-breath. What's the energetic quality of that out-breath felt from within the body?

Keep this receptive attitude and just be interested in the impact of each in-breath and each out-breath. Let the breath take a natural rhythm, letting the breaths be full. How does that feel?

Sometimes it can be helpful to associate a brief syllable with the in-breath and a brief syllable with the out-breath. This helps remind us to stay present and helps occupy the verbal part of the mind. In Thailand, the two syllables used for this purpose are "buddho." Budd on the in-breath, ho on the out-breath. Buddho is just another version of Buddha.

As we remind ourselves with these two syllables, we are also reminding ourselves of this refuge—of the knowing of mindfulness, the understanding of mindfulness, the wakeful quality of mindfulness. You might play with this in this sitting, feeling the breath throughout the whole body with the note of budd on the in-breath and ho on the out-breath. See if this is helpful for you. If not, feel free to drop it.

As you're connecting with the breath, you may find that your attention very naturally settles in a smaller area than the whole body. Many of us have spent years practicing with the breath in the belly, in the chest, at the tip of the nose or upper lip. If that's the case and your attention naturally wants to land there and settle there, that's fine.

This whole body breathing can be helpful to bring in a broader perspective. Sometimes it helps connect with a sense of ease, but it's also fine if the attention naturally lands in a smaller area and the breath is felt there with the same receptive attitude, allowing the rhythm to be natural and the breath to be full.

As you feel the breath within the body from inside, allow it to take its natural rhythm. Just start to tune in:

is there any point at which this rhythmic breath has an effect of calming, of soothing, of softening the body and mind? If so, appreciate that and see if there are any factors that help that calming to take place. How is it that the breath in its natural rhythm might exert its calming influence on body and mind?

In your sitting practice today, please do experiment with the breath as an anchor. See if it's going to be suitable for you. The broad perspective of feeling the breath in the whole body that I introduced this morning is really helpful to guard against striving, because the bigger space just takes off some of the pressure and intensity and leads into that ability to relax. So you can play with this frame of the whole body.

Sometimes the degree of openness leads the mind to drift a little more easily. In that case, it could be helpful to use the syllables "bud-dho." Or if you like, let the breath rest in a smaller area if that's more comfortable for you. Either of those is fine. And again, feel free to explore the other anchors of the full body posture or sound if you find that more conducive.

In the walking practice today—I think Sally alluded to this yesterday—as you're walking back and forth on your chosen walking path, the main focus will be the experience of the body in walking. Again, you might experiment with feeling the whole body in walking, where the more intense sensations may be in the legs and feet but you can still keep that frame of the whole body. If the attention becomes more scattered, you might find it helpful to narrow the focus a bit.

Then see if in the walking you can start to bring in some connection with the breath. Because we are doing a practice focused on tranquility—*samatha*—in this first part of the retreat, the normal instructions for *sa matha* practice with the breath are that you stay with the breath all day long as the primary object. That's really challenging, especially at the start of a retreat. But see if you can start to bring in, during the walking, a connection—an ongoing connection with the breath as an element in your experience.

It may be that at this point most of your attention is with the movement of the body, legs, and feet. But see if you can start to bring in a regular noticing of breathing while you're doing the walking meditation. As time goes by, that continuity with the breath that goes from sitting into the next walking will help retain that connection in the next sitting. So the connection with the breath will get stronger over the days the more that we're in contact with it. See if you can start to just bring that in during the walking as a regular element.

Any questions this morning?

A student asks about tension in the abdomen area. If it's just tension that might come and go, then it's nothing really to worry about. We just notice it as one of the elements of the experience. If it feels like it's connected with some old injury or trauma, then it might be helpful to place the attention somewhere else—specifically in the chest or perhaps the nose.

But if it's the kind of tension that comes and goes throughout the day or from day to day, then I wouldn't

worry too much about it. Just meet it with a sense of acceptance. You might notice from time to time the feeling tone of it. Tension is usually a little bit unpleasant, so notice the unpleasant feeling tone. Notice if there's a mental reaction of aversion, of disliking. If so, just be with that with some degree of allowing—"Okay, don't like it, but here it is"—and allow it to be present with the overall experience. If the mind starts to become too fixated on it, then it might be helpful to place the attention in another part of the body deliberately. Otherwise, it's just an aspect of the experience.

We're going to begin the individual practice meetings this morning, so I wanted to say a little bit about that. It's really a chance for us to hear how the retreat is going for you, how the meditation practice is going for you. At this point in the retreat, there may not be very much dramatic going on because most of you have just arrived. Some of you have been here for a while, so there may be a little more that's up.

You might just give a little bit of thought before you come in to the meeting about what you'd like to share. It doesn't have to involve a lot of rehearsal. When we rehearse, it's along the lines of "I'm going to say this, and then they're going to say that in reply, and when they say that, I'm going to..." That doesn't really usually unfold that way. But just think a little about what you might like to share about your experience so far.

It could be fairly simple—just settling in. Some of you have been practicing for a while and there might be some detail in what's happening for you. So you could give us an account of your general experience of being in the retreat, especially if you're just settling. If more is happening in your practice, it's helpful for us to know what's happening at the leading edge.

What you're kind of up to, and gives us a sense of how you might develop from there. This is quite helpful to know in some detail as part of your report.

Generally, it's a description of the best sitting. Best meaning not necessarily most pleasant, but where you have been most present—where the mindfulness has been strongest. Whether the experience is pleasant or unpleasant isn't so important, but how have you been present for the experience?

And then tell us a little bit about your walking meditation: how that's going, how present you feel, what's helpful in walking, what's not.

So you might begin with a little bit of report on how things are going, and then any specific questions that you have about how to practice, how to meet a certain situation, how to practice with the conditions you find yourself in. Share anything that's been difficult, and also anything that's been going well. Meditation teachers like to hear what's going well for you, so don't scrimp on that part.

That's a general outline: overview of your experience, details of a good sitting in the last couple of days, any particular questions, any challenges that are up.

We have fifteen minutes per person, so if you'd help us keep an eye on that time. I haven't quite looked in

the library yet—hopefully there will be a clock that can face you and a clock that can face me so that we can keep on track. We have a very full morning. Oftentimes we'll see ten people between now and lunch, so it's helpful for us to keep on track so we can all go to lunch—the most important part of the day, right?

I think that's all for now. One announcement: the affinity sits will begin today. The six-thirty sit in the Council House Library will be the BIPOC affinity sit. All the members who identify as BIPOC are welcome to attend, though not obligated. It's optional. Whichever group you're in, you're welcome to attend. It's nice to show support for the other members of your community, but don't feel obligated. If your own practice schedule inclines you to sit somewhere else, that's totally fine.

So we have another beautiful day of practice, although a little cooler than yesterday. I hope you'll enjoy it.

May will be sitting in on the individual meetings this morning, if that's comfortable for you. Again, it's a real contribution to her learning and her training, if that's okay with you. But if at any point you'd prefer to have just a one-to-one, let us know, and May is happy to step out.

A beautiful practice day. Thank you for listening.

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