Tracking Breathing

Patrick Kearney · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Patrick Kearney · 57:11

This morning we're going to play with using breathing as meditation object. We'll start with a number of experiments and then we'll have a discussion afterwards.

Treat these exercises as games. Don't take them seriously. I think the more playful you are in your attitude, the more likely it is that you'll get some benefit from them. Whatever happens is what is supposed to happen.

If you get into your meditation posture and begin by being aware of the whole body, opening your awareness up to the whole body. Now look for the movements within the body that are associated with inhalation and exhalation. Where are these movements clearest and most obvious to you? In the belly? In the midriff? In the chest? In the throat, shoulders, head? Start to focus on wherever these movements are clearest and most obvious to you.

If there are movements, they must be going in some direction. In what direction do these movements travel? Are they vertical? Are they horizontal? Are they curved? Do they expand and contract? Focus on direction. In what direction do these movements travel?

Let's assume we have two movements, one associated with inhalation and one associated with exhalation. Is the movement associated with inhalation longer or shorter than the movement associated with exhalation? Is the movement associated with exhalation longer or shorter than the movement associated with inhalation? Or are they both equally long or equally short? Focus on length. Which one is longer? Which one is shorter? Or are they the same?

Is the movement associated with inhalation clearer or less clear than the movement associated with exhalation? Is the movement associated with exhalation clearer or less clear than the movement associated with inhalation? Or are they both equally clear, or both equally obscure? Focus on clarity. Which one is clearest? Which one is least clear?

If there are two movements, then each movement must have a beginning and an end. Can you see the beginning and the end of the movement associated with inhalation? Can you see the beginning and the end of the movement associated with exhalation? Or are you missing parts? And if so, which parts are you missing? Focus on beginnings and ends.

These exercises require precision and detail in your awareness. As you attempt them, do you feel any sense of strain in the mind? Do you feel any tension in the body? Do you find yourself interfering in any way with these movements? If any of this is happening, step back from the details of the breathing and

relax. Watch the movements. Don't do the movements.

Or if you realize you can't help but do them, then watch the mind that is doing. Make your relationship to the movements your meditation object.

And again, open your awareness to the whole body. Take your awareness back away from the detail of the movements and rest in the whole field of the body. Just feel any sensation or any movement that's occurring throughout the body and be aware of the general field of the body. No need to focus on any particular thing. Just on the experience of sitting here now.

So, where did you find the movements? Where were they clearest and most obvious?

"Nostrils."

All the time? Consistent?

"Sometimes the whole process. So sometimes just the nostrils, sometimes the whole process."

Anybody else?

"Ribcage. Consistent throughout—in breath, the ribcage, out breath."

"Wherever I focus, that's where I feel it. So if I focus on my stomach, that's where I feel the breathing. Focus on my ribcage, that's where it will be. If it's on my neck, I'll feel it there."

So did you play around with different places? Did you settle on any one thing eventually?

"No, I sort of held it there. It's up to me what I want to do."

And anywhere works? It doesn't matter where it is?

"It does. It actually came to the nostrils, came to the back of the throat, all the way down, out. It's fine everywhere. It can actually be anywhere. It depends on my focus."

"When you said, 'where do you find the movement,' I found it everywhere. I was looking at it, it was like a chain. The movement of chains. But then when you said, 'where do you find it strongest,' the whole thing changed. Of course, I found it strongest in most of my abdomen, and my nose, this area—this whole area."

So the movements themselves are everywhere, but there's a clear, distinct area where they're clearest and strongest.

You notice in these exercises—they're exercises on breathing meditation—and I try to avoid the word "breathing," and I minimize any use of the words "inhalation" and "exhalation." That is for a reason, but we can talk about that.

Where do the movements go? In what direction?

"Up, down."

Vertical? Straight up, straight down?

"Not straight—bendy up and bendy down."

"Mine was up in breath. Up and then out. Out from down there. So up and then out from down here."

"And the back was down. The shoulders were down."

"I just had like a slow-motion flower image."

Expansion, contraction or opening and closing? So going in all directions?

"Opening in all directions and closing in."

"So I didn't feel breath."

This is precisely the richness I hoped to explore through this investigation. When you asked about direction, I found I could focus on various places. I had the concept of 'in and out,' but this felt somewhat forced, because when I actually experienced the sensations, nothing was going anywhere—it was simply vibrating. It was like a gentle pulsation, just this rising and falling sensation, rather than any movement in or out.

We tend to conceptualize it as 'in and out' because we're thinking about the breath as an idea. Did you find direction significant for you?

Well, there was an up and down quality, a vibration. Direction wasn't particularly meaningful for me. When I focused on the abdomen and torso, there was definitely expansion and contraction. But when I attended to the tip of my nose, there wasn't any particular direction—just vibration and sensation.

Now, which is longer—the inhalation or the exhalation? And which is shorter?

The exhalation feels longer than the inhalation. How many would agree that the out-breath is longer than the in-breath? How many would say the in-breath is longer? How many would say they're equal? And how many would say 'all of the above'?

It's fascinating when we have these discussions—the variety of experiences people report, including how any one person can have completely different experiences over time.

In my instructions, I deliberately say, "Let's assume there are two movements, one associated with inhalation and one associated with exhalation." I phrase it this way because I used to simply state, "There are two movements." Then one day, someone at exactly this point in our exploration said, "That's incorrect. There aren't two movements. There is only one movement."

How many would agree with that observation? That there aren't really two movements, but actually just one continuous movement?

I notice that when we began discussing beginnings and endings, some resistance arose. I didn't want to go there immediately—we haven't reached that investigation yet.

But it's on the same lines of what you're asking. So, a single movement. Yes. You have this sense of the unity of just one movement. Anybody else know just one movement?

"It's like a loop."

A loop. So it's not one-two, it's just one single loop.

"Once I started to concentrate on the beginning and end, that was really aggravating. The loop was more comfortable."

So let's move on to beginnings then. Peter, you just totally objected to the beginnings.

"When you said I didn't want to go to beginnings and ends, I made myself do it, but really I was quite happy with not having a beginning."

When you made yourself do it, what happened?

"I got it. It felt a little bit uncomfortable."

Did it feel artificial?

"Yes."

This is an example of the power of suggestion in meditation practices. If you're told, "Look, there's X, so go and find it," you look for it, and you might not find it. But you convince yourself it's there, and then the mind can conjure it up. This is quite an interesting aspect of meditation practice—the power of suggestion. To what extent is my experience real, or to what extent am I just inventing it? Or does it make no difference? Even if I'm inventing it, if I'm experiencing it, then it's real. It's quite an interesting area. It's a question of how you conceptualize it.

The idea of beginning and ending—these are concepts. It's a way of organizing reality, thought, experience along various dimensions which may or may not have validity. So we've been talking about the power of concept. It's like there's something going on.

The Buddha's basic stance is this: he says, "Look, there is something out there. There is something going on. It's just that it's not what we think it is." Because we operate in this world of concepts. And the more you actually look at this, the more you see how deeply entangled the concepts are with the experience. And this kind of exercise demonstrates that.

The whole question becomes: is this a concept of something, or is it really something? In the Buddha's language, have I actually hit the elemental level? When we're talking about breathing, that's a concept. What's underneath it is air element. We played with the elements yesterday, and there we were looking for movement, which we called air element.

But really, when we're doing breathing meditation, the object of the meditation is not breathing. Breathing is a concept. The object of meditation is the air element and the way that the air element moves around.

So, Mao's description—"Movement. Well, it's everywhere"—he conceptualized it as qi, as prana. But when you ask, "Where is it clearest and most obvious?" it resolves down here, somewhere in an area which we would recognize as breathing. But these are just concepts.

When we do the meditation practice, we use the concepts. But it's really important not to get trapped in them and to actually get at what is actually happening—not my concept of it, but what's actually going on.

We could have philosophical debates about whether or not it's possible to have a non-conceptual experience. People do have philosophical debates about this. But for our purposes, sending awareness in the direction of "Let me get beneath the concept to the elemental quality underneath"—that sends awareness in the correct direction, in the direction that we want to go as meditators. Whatever is there, we're getting closer and closer and closer to it. And we're getting further away from the way we habitually conceive it. That's the key.

What we actually come up with doesn't really matter. Whether it's clearer or not clear, longer or not long, or what direction it is and so on. All this is trivia, actually. What's important is that sending the awareness deeper and deeper, becoming more intimate with the more elemental quality, becoming more and more intimate with the experience.

Kim raised a fascinating point about touch points. "Many years ago I was given instructions to watch touch points, and I always found it fascinating that regardless of whether there was a sensation at those points, the mind was still able to go there. It was sort of like the awareness of a place in the body as opposed to a sensation. But it worked really well."

"So that was conceptual, very much so, for a lot of the time that I was doing it. And I always found that fascinating."

"Why was it conceptual? What made it conceptual?" I asked.

"Well, the mind was imagining a spot. Because the eyes were closed, so to say, it was the kneecap. Quite often there'd be no sensation whatsoever."

"But you had a sense of the awareness in space and you knew that that was the kneecap?"

"Yes. So the mind was doing three points. The sitting and the whole body. Sitting, left kneecap, right

kneecap."

So you could put your awareness in a space. Conceptually you knew this is the left kneecap, that's the right kneecap, even though there was no sensation. You could say you were using the concept to aim your awareness. But I would say you did have a genuine, non-conceptual experience—basically a space element.

The Buddha talks about awareness lands. There's a sense in which awareness has location, which is quite interesting. So this is bound up with body. I am aware of you, but my awareness of you has location. It's here. I'm not aware of you from over there. I'm aware of you from here, which is bound up with body—the fact that awareness and mind and body come together as a package. But there's also a sense of the object of awareness. My sense of you is over there, so space.

There is this quality of space. I think strictly speaking, space is listed as one of the elements. The Buddha lists space as one of the elements. If you use sound as a meditation object, you get a sense of space. You can have a sense that this sound is close but that sound is further away. So you have a sense of extending out the space element. I think what you're talking about is working largely with space rather than with sensation.

"I've been instructed, the breath had disappeared at the time that the teacher said to do this."

That makes sense.

Another student mentioned something about the directional aspect of breathing: "Even though we're not interfering with the breathing, I'm always aware in varying degrees of a point at the top and bottom of intention."

"Intention?"

"Yeah, I think it's because if you have hiccups, you hold your breath. So even if you're not trying to control it, there's a whiff of an awareness that I'm changing now."

Ah, I see. You mean the actual move into... People who talk about this say that intention is most clear on the inhalation. One person said that when he was doing these exercises, he grew quite alarmed because he would exhale and then he's just following the movements, and then there's nothing happening at all.

And then suddenly there's a moment of panic because the mind knows, if I don't breathe, I'll die. There's a moment of panic and the inhalation begins. And he didn't find an intention for the exhalation, but he found it very clearly for the inhalation.

So that's another aspect you can play with in terms of breathing—where's the intentionality of it? What role does that play? Is there a decision to end a movement? And again, it doesn't matter what answer you come up with. As a matter of fact, that you're asking the question, that you're interested in the question,

means that your awareness is being directed towards a subtle object. And the mere doing of that is making your mind clearer, sharper, more subtle, more refined. So it's helping the meditation process.

Interest and curiosity are really important. In the factors of awakening, of course, the second one after mindfulness is investigation of phenomena. Now this often, for all intents and purposes, means curiosity. So if you have that curious interest, then you're stimulating that awakening factor.

When you think about the point of non-interfering, because in contemporary psychology, as you know, they talk about controlling your breath. In fact, if you want to increase your heart rate variability, you do a longer out-breath than in-breath, and you time it. And I know in yoga too they also talk about controlling the breath. And there's been a few debates that I've had on the internet with other psychologists about how it's no control. Mindfulness of breath is that relinquishing control completely.

And so I find that when I'm doing mindfulness of breath I'm very conscious of letting go. And then noticing how short the inhalation is compared to the exhalation. Because I've been studying that controlled breathing and all that sort of thing. So my thoughts are that when we relinquish control, it helps us understand ananda. And when you control that, it creates that illusion that you actually have control.

Before we get onto that, let's raise a question about interference. Did anybody feel that they were interfering with the breathing?

"When you suggested finding the beginning and end, I found that that suggestion actually created that sort of movement or intention to find it. At the time the breath was very subtle and I just noticed this very subtle shift to then, oh, yeah, I've got to find it, just that mind movement."

"Yeah, moving closer in and then trying to... it wasn't actually there, there wasn't actually an ending for the exhalation, but then I noticed myself becoming more forced, the breathing."

"Did you create an end in the end?"

"I did, in the end, yeah. And I noticed that then it became... the breath became less subtle again, and more gross, and yeah, I realized I was straining a bit."

So did everybody hear what Robin was saying? That the breathing was very refined. Then when I said find beginnings and ends, then the sense of strain came in, leading to actually creating an end to be found. This is a classic description of how we can easily interfere with the breathing. And breathing is very easy to interfere with.

Sometimes I ask this question: do you notice that you're interfering with the breath or not? Some people say yes. "When I'm trying to be detailed with it and I notice that I interfere with it, it gets disturbed." Some people say no. One person objected, saying, "Look, since the only possible awareness I have of the breath is when I'm being aware of it, how would I know what it's like when I'm not being aware of it? So it's

impossible to say if I'm interfering with it." I thought, well that's an interesting response.

But sometimes you do get this sense of interference. I get the sense that the breath becomes disturbed. If I focus on it, it becomes disturbed. So I know that the awareness is interfering with it. But breathing is particularly sensitive to the state of the mind. This is well known among people who talk about breathing meditation. So if I get agitated, my breathing will become agitated. If I calm down, my breathing will calm down. If I want to calm down, one way to do it is to calm my breathing, and I will calm down. So there's this well-known link.

So this raises questions about whether we can deliberately interfere with the breath to improve the breathing meditation experience. For a certain proportion of people, they simply cannot do breathing meditation unless they interfere with their breathing.

Some practitioners, year after year, fall asleep every time they attempt breathing meditation. They struggle and strive, but it makes no difference. They can be completely awake, walk into a meditation hall, follow the instructions, focus on the breathing, and five minutes later they're unconscious. There's nothing they can do about it, and it's incredibly frustrating.

My hypothesis is that these are shallow breathers. When you begin to meditate on breathing, the breath naturally becomes more subtle and refined. They quickly reach a point where they're not getting enough oxygen, and the brain simply turns off. The only way they can practice breathing meditation is by deliberately interfering with the breath. The simplest method is to extend the exhalation—that's one of the standard approaches.

From a meditation perspective, deliberately breathing in some particular way is neither necessarily good nor necessarily bad. In certain circumstances it's useful, and some people find it extremely beneficial. Some of my students use it to develop concentration. They count their breaths and can tell you precisely: "In one hour I will breathe X number of times." When it drops beneath a certain number, they know they've achieved good concentration. People can be very precise with this approach.

For others, attempting such techniques creates hopeless confusion. For me, it doesn't work. I have a very problematic relationship with breathing—lifelong asthma, bronchitis, and so forth. I don't like breathing as a meditation object. I've never liked it, and I can't do that kind of precise manipulation. At least I haven't been able to up to now.

As for whether this relates to mindfulness—I don't think it has anything to do with mindfulness itself. Mindfulness is remembering the breathing. Whether the breathing is completely natural and uninterfered with, or whether it's artificial, neither of these is the mindfulness. The mindfulness is remembering whatever it is—staying with it over time, whatever form it takes.

In developing your own meditation practice, it's up to you to discover what works best. Does it serve you to have a relationship where you don't interfere with the breathing?

There's another consideration Mel mentioned: if I don't interfere with the breathing and simply allow it to be what it is, that encourages the perception of anatta. If I deliberately breathe and develop good concentration as a foundation, that's not cultivating the sense of anatta. It may create a sense of someone back there who's doing it, subtly reinforcing that perception. These are side effects to consider.

But in terms of your individual practice, what relationship to breathing works best for you as a meditator? This will be different for different people.

I find it does change over time. If you can make the choice—"I'm not going to do anything with it, I'm just going to be aware of it"—I think it's a valuable exercise. It's particularly interesting and challenging for me.

What this means is I can't be too detailed with the breath. If I engage in very precise exercises, the tendency to interfere, to shake it up a bit, becomes overwhelmingly strong. I have to step back and create a sense of distance.

Personally, what I do is make the whole body the object, and within that there's the movement of breath. But I'm not making the breath movements the primary focus.

I make the whole body the focus, and that works for me.

*Student:** So the purpose of the detail is?

*Teacher:** Again, you notice that we're practicing precision.

*Student:** So it's for concentration?

*Teacher:** It's for developing insight. Precision gives you details that you don't otherwise get, and the details change. Precision gives you the perception of impermanence. But equally, the effort that you make could create a sense of self. So it's always a balance between the different aspects.

*Student:** If you were observing the desire to interfere with the breathing, or the recognition that "this is when I could interfere with the breathing," then that is intention, and that's creation that leads into the whole creation of what you're doing—you're creating things, creating karma. But why is it more "creating something" than doing anything else?

*Teacher:** Because you're aware of it. Normally, during the day, I don't have intentions to breathe or to hold my breath. I don't notice intention. It must be there, but when I'm doing breath meditation, I notice the intention to breathe or the intention not to stop. And then there's an intention—oh, yeah, I get it.

Basically there you're watching mind rather than breathing. So it's the mind-body thing. If you're just watching movements, you're on body. But if you're watching your relationship to the breathing, it's actually mind—it's your meditation object.

*Student:** It's going to sneak back there, isn't it? It's sort of more interesting.

*Teacher:** For some. That's a very smart answer. Watch this—it's not quite as boring as I thought it was. And so if that's your natural inclination, why not? Then the breathing operates as a support for your investigation of the mind.

*Student:** But we can breathe without any tension, and I normally do. This is when I'm meditating, suddenly... What I find is that in certain circumstances I have this long-standing habit where I forget to breathe. This is in normal everyday life. I'll be doing something that involves some degree of tension, either physical or mental, and what I would notice is that I'm doing something and getting more and more agitated and frustrated about it, even though the objective situation is such that—why am I getting agitated and frustrated about it? And I suddenly realize that in the focus on this, I've forgotten to breathe. The longer I do that, the more agitated I become. So I've trained myself to notice when I forget to breathe.

Now I don't know if this is because of my background with asthma or whether it's a more universal thing, but I frequently forget to breathe.

*Teacher:** But you do remember eventually.

*Student:** Yeah, eventually.

*Teacher:** You survive thus far.

*Student:** Yeah, but only just. But if you didn't remember, your body would just breathe anyway because it's not actually you breathing.

*Teacher:** No, it doesn't breathe. It stops breathing. And you fall down.

*Student:** If I was determined enough, eventually I do start again. But there's a period of time when I'm not breathing which has no reason why I shouldn't be breathing except that I've forgotten to do it.

*Teacher:** No, I think everybody actually does that because it's a stress reaction. A lot of people do that.

They clamp up and stop breathing. That's why I tell people who are really stressed to just stop, calm down, and take a deep breath—then hopefully they can find some relief.

This is actually why, in our stretches, when we reach that point—the edge where you're encountering the barrier—I always say breathe and relax. Because that's precisely when people stop breathing, when there's tension.

As a matter of interest, when I did sessions with Holi-san, he would work with breathing exercises that I could never manage. It was like working with the *mu* koan—he would have us breathe in for a short period, maybe thirty seconds or so, then breathe out for an extended time. This practice has much to do with calming and focusing attention, being substantive rather than scattered. Apparently it's a very

effective samatha technique, though I had great difficulty with it.

When you opened up to the whole body, how did that experience unfold for you?

"For me, after the forcing of the breath, it was like a relief—I could go back to just breathing naturally again."

And is that more your natural style, this opening up and relaxing approach?

"Less effort. It requires much less effort."

So you found it less effortful?

"Maybe I interpret it as finally being able to rest. Opening up to the whole body feels like having a rest."

Could you maintain clarity of mind? Were you able to stay with the meditation object, or did you begin to drift?

"Yes, that's exactly what happened."

This points to one of the fundamental dynamics in practice. There's this ongoing choice between needing something specific to hold onto versus the tendency to drift. Some practitioners don't need a particular anchor—they can work with a general field as their meditation object quite successfully. By "working," I mean the mind remains clear, mindfulness stays continuous, and concentration develops naturally.

But for other meditators, when they open up, while it feels very pleasant, they become lost. And even for the same person, at certain stages of practice, opening up leads to wandering, while at other stages, opening up works perfectly well. Sometimes the mind simply refuses to hold onto a single object and insists on expanding awareness—and that's completely appropriate.

This depends entirely on where you are in any given moment. But it does illuminate these two fundamental approaches available to us: we can either focus inward on a specific object, or we can step back and open awareness outward. Broadly speaking, these are our two primary choices.

Which approach to take depends on circumstances. Sometimes it's most skillful to focus narrowly and precisely. Sometimes it's most beneficial to step back and expand upward and outward. Part of developing as a meditator involves learning when to apply which approach.

There's more than one way to approach this practice skillfully.

Any questions or comments before we conclude?

Thank you all very much for your attention and participation today.

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