Tracking Breathing (Workshop)

Patrick Kearney · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Patrick Kearney · 45:41

This morning we're going to look at breathing as meditation object. Breathing is probably the most common meditation object in the world of Buddhist meditation. It's practiced by the Buddha, taught by the Buddha, recommended by the Buddha, so it comes highly credentialed. Although, as I think we mentioned, it's not necessarily the best grounding object for everybody. For some people it's quite a difficult meditation object. But what we'll do is a series of experiments in breathing meditation, and then we'll see what happens as a result.

Settle into your meditation posture, constructing the posture from the ground up. Be aware of the sensations at the base of your body, and from there lift up through your spine. Relax your shoulders and let your head come into balance.

Let yourself become aware of what is happening throughout your body. At the bottom is the hardness and stability of your contact with the ground. Rising up from there is the lift and firmness of your spine. Around that frame there is a field of sensations coming and going.

Are you breathing? How do you know you are breathing? Isn't it the experience of movement within your body—movements of breathing in and breathing out? Bring your awareness to these movements of in-breath and out-breath. Where are these movements clearest and most obvious to you? In your belly? In your midriff? In your chest, in your throat, shoulders, or head? Focus wherever these movements are clearest and most obvious to you.

If there are movements, these movements must be going somewhere. In what directions do these movements of your in-breath and out-breath travel? Are they vertical, moving up and down? Are they horizontal, moving in and out? Are they curved or curly? Do they expand and contract? Focus on directions. In which directions are these movements going?

Let's assume there are two movements, one for your in-breath and one for your out-breath. Is the movement of your in-breath longer or shorter than the movement of your out-breath? Is the movement of your out-breath longer or shorter than the movement of your in-breath? Which one is longest? Which one is shortest? Or are they of equal length? Focus on length.

Is the movement of your in-breath clearer or less clear than the movement of your out-breath? Is the movement of your out-breath clearer or less clear than the movement of your in-breath? Or are they both equally clear, or both equally obscure? Focus on clarity. Which one is clearest? Which one is least clear?

Can you see the beginning and the end of the movement of your in-breath? Can you see the beginning and

the end of the movement of your out-breath? Or are you missing parts? If you are missing parts, which parts are you missing? Focus on beginnings and ends.

Movement happens within space. Can you find the space within which your breathing moves? For this one, do not focus on the movements, but open your awareness to the space through which these movements travel. Can you find it? Don't worry if you cannot. Do not strain to find it.

Just notice the movements and feel the space around them. You need to be precise and detailed in your awareness to do these exercises.

As you do them, do you feel any sense of strain in your mind? Do you feel any tension in your body? Do you find yourself interfering in any way with the movements of your breathing? If any of this is happening, step back from the details of the movements and relax. Be aware of the movements. Don't do the movements. Be aware. Don't do.

So where were they? Where were they clearest and most obvious?

In the abdomen. And entrance at the nostrils. Simultaneously? Yes. So simultaneously up here and down here. And that was consistent? Pretty much. Sometimes it was just the nostrils, sometimes it was just there.

Anyone else? Where were they clearest? Belly? Ribcage. Is that normal, finding it in the ribcage? Not abnormal. So just today, that's where it happened to be. And for you? Beginning with the solar plexus, but gradually it dropped down as the whole thing progressed.

You notice that we start with what is clear, what is obvious. That's the basic place to start. If you're practising mindfulness—and we're talking more about mindfulness here—but in the tradition, when they ask the question, "What gives rise to mindfulness?" one of the answers is a clear perception. So if something is clear, you can cultivate a continuity of awareness on it. Look for what is clear.

In the different mindfulness techniques that come down to us, when we're presented with the recommended primary object or grounding object, the reason why that was selected was because the people who created the method thought this would be clear. So go for what is clear. If we settle awareness on what is clear, what is obvious, and stay with it, the mind will become stronger, clearer, more subtle, and what is originally hidden will emerge quite naturally.

What directions were they travelling in?

I think direction was the easiest to stay with. Initially, lying down, there's the expansion and contraction—the change in the horizontal direction. Through the nose, I thought it was kind of in and out, but then at some point I realised it was actually more curving around.

So you found direction really useful? Yes. Normally I find focusing on the breath quite traumatic. I find it activating and a bit stressful.

Keep playing around with the direction. But the more general principle is—well, first of all, breathing can be problematic. For a lot of people it's problematic. It's problematic for me because I've got lifelong asthma, bronchitis, and so on and so forth. So when I started meditation back in the day, and there were these books that

went on and on about the glories of breathing meditation—how mystical it is, how you become one with the universe, how the universe breathes through you, and so on and so forth. And I thought, "I have no idea what they're talking about." Breathing is a struggle to survive as far as I'm concerned.

So if breathing is problematic, first of all, you don't treat it as a grounding object. It's simply not suitable. Secondly, you treat it as a secondary object. Basically, when it swims into view, you acknowledge it—okay, here it is—but you go for something that is clear and obvious to you and not upsetting. And in this case, it was the direction.

One student shared: "For the last four months, I've had this chronic nasal congestion, and I'm asthmatic as well. So at one point, after the direction exercise, doing whatever came next, I got this wave of emotion and tears started coming. And then, of course, the nose got more blocked. And so breathing through the mouth and being self-conscious that I'm making too much noise—I just had to skip ahead."

Did anybody find the space within which you breathe? You found it? And it was also in the abdomen, so you could actually feel your abdomen expanding. Was that sense of looking for the space clear?

"It's a familiar kind of thing."

Anybody else find space? Did anybody think, "What the hell is he talking about?"

"I have a sense of my physical boundaries. There's space in my breath that I've got to find. But the challenge was—I didn't really understand the question."

When I drop in these things, they can be quite discombobulating. Or they can make perfect sense. You just don't know until you try. But the reason I introduced space was that I had one student who had been meditating for a long time. And one time in an interview, he said that he had finally clicked with breathing meditation—after struggling with it for years and years, he finally clicked. I asked him, "So how did you do it?" And he said, "I just forgot about the breathing and focused on the space within which the breathing happens." And there it was, perfectly clear. So I decided to add it to the script.

These things are quite mysterious—what the mind will hit on. And this I can get. So in your case, it was directions. And the space too. Good.

You never know. Some of these things that I toss in are completely obscure. You might think, "I have no idea what you're talking about." Fine. Just forget about it. But you're playing around to see what you can find, what does make sense. And it's quite arbitrary. It's not that there's right and there's wrong. We're just playing about.

Actually, there's another one I didn't include in the script, but I should add: rhythm. Isn't there a rhythm to the movement? And that comes from the same place—a long-time student who said, "I've discovered the rhythm of the breath, and then I could stay with it."

But these are just illustrations of the creativity that you bring to this practice. For a start, what is the experience? How does it actually present to you? And what aspect of it can I connect with?

Which one is longest? Which one is shortest? That's a pretty obvious one, isn't it? Out long, in short. How many people would vote for a long out and a short in? How many people would vote the opposite—long in, short out?

So you notice that there's no one correct answer. There's never one correct answer. There is never one correct experience. There's what you are experiencing now. That's it. That's what's going on.

But yes, let's experiment further. Which one is clearest—in or out? Some find them pretty much the same, but with the in being so much longer than the out. The in was definitely longer than the out, but both equally clear.

Did you find beginnings and ends? Were they clear? How many people found a clear, distinct border to the end of the out-breath—like, this is the point that the out-breath ends? Some know it's the end, but it's kind of faded because it overlaps with the beginning of the in-breath. You know it's finished, but you can't actually pinpoint exactly when. It's not like a dot. It's more of a fade. What about the end of the in-breath? Is that a dot? So you can't quite pinpoint it—it's a continuous flow. We'll get back to that.

Is there a gap between out and in, a rest period? Anybody find the gap between the out and the in? This is fairly common. One of the things about the out-breath is apparently—and when I say these physiological things I'm really guessing because I just hear about them—but apparently the body relaxes on the out-breath. And what can easily happen when people are doing breathing meditation and they complain that they're falling asleep or getting really dull, usually, more often than not, it happens on the out-breath. The out-breath kind of fades away, and as the out-breath fades away, the mind fades away.

So that's something to look for if you are getting dull during breathing meditation. Check your relationship to the out-breath. Check to see if there is a gap between the out-breath and the in-breath. And what does the mind do during that gap? Is it staying sharp and alert? Or is it going out for a snack and coming back later on?

These are the sorts of things to check on.

When I talked about movements, and this is something that you raised, I said let's assume there are two movements—one for the in-breath, one for the out-breath. Is that correct? Are there two movements?

"You would debate that. It just happens."

Yes, I think that's a fairly common experience. And when that happens, it shows you that if you're going to space out during breathing meditation, you're more likely to space out on the out-breath.

"Can I also say that it's the place where I will stop breathing? On the out-breath. If something happens, I actually hold it from that point."

That's another interesting thing about breathing—the close relationship between the breathing and the emotional life, and how they interconnect.

"For me it was the two polar opposites. So it's the same movement, but one is going up, the other one is going down. So there's not two movements, there's actually one movement, but it just changes direction."

Correct. How many people would agree with that? It's actually one movement.

"I don't know. Three movements."

Three movements? So discrete, separate movements, each in and out?

"No, they're overlapped. But you could distinguish them."

Good. So again, this shows us the variety of experiences that people have. We assume that if you have a room full of people and they're given the instruction to be mindful of breathing, they're all doing the same thing. But actually they're not. They're doing different things, because the breathing—what we call breathing, quote-unquote—presents in different ways at different times to different people. And as meditators, what we want to do is clarify: how is it presenting to me now?

"Patrick, when you were having interviews with Dada, specifically around breathing, would he be asking questions around direction, or would you be expected to report on that?"

First of all, he emphasized rising and falling of the abdomen, and you had to report that. You just had to. So in that sense it was quite rigid. But within that, what he wanted to know was exactly this kind of detail. How long was it? What was clear? What was not clear? What bits were missing? What bits were not missing? So it was using the structure of the rising and falling of the abdomen, but using that to be really detailed and precise on what exactly is happening—not just, "Oh, you know, it goes up and down." That was not good enough.

And the precision is important. We talked about it yesterday, and it's the same thing here. If you're practicing for insight, if that's the project, well, how does insight arise? The Buddha says it arises through the perception of impermanence, through the perception of change.

If someone comes into an interview, for example, and let's say they're using breathing as a meditation object, and I say, "How is it?" and they say, "Oh, it's really boring. This is really boring." And I say, "How is it boring?" And they say, "I'm sitting there breathing in, out, in, out, all day long." Now, do they get my sympathy? No. I say, "Well, obviously, you are not paying attention."

Because if you were paying attention, it would not be the same. This is really basic for this style of practice.

So we're generating accuracy and precision, but we're doing it because we want to see change. And the more accurate you are, the more change will present itself. Therefore, the more detail you can present in an interview. And if you're presenting detail in an interview, then the teacher can think, okay, they're seeing change.

Now, what detail is being presented is usually completely irrelevant. It really doesn't matter. But the fact that there is detail means the person is seeing change—that this breath is not the same as that breath. But if this breath is the same as that breath, that's the perception of permanence, nicca-saññā. And for the Buddha, the human condition of delusion is built upon nicca-saññā, the perception of sameness. The perception of self is built upon the perception of sameness, for example. You can't have a sense of self unless you're sitting there having this discussion, absolutely convinced that the person sitting here having this discussion is exactly the same person who turned up here a few days ago. If you don't believe that, you can't have a self.

So the perception of change is really important. And what the method is doing is getting an entry into that by using detail and precision.

Anybody find they were interfering with the breathing? Why were you doing that? Anxiety and breathing—closely linked. A psychologist and long-time meditator, a friend of mine, when he teaches meditation, strongly recommends that people suffering from anxiety should not use breathing as a meditation object. They should just not use it. It's not suitable. I'm not a psychologist, so I'm not in a position to comment, but anxiety and focusing on breathing can be very close.

The relationship to breathing is very important because it's very easy to reach out and try to control it—especially when it's a meditation object, and especially when it's an important meditation object. Because we're projecting all this importance onto it. And it's got to perform. If it's not performing, how can I succeed in my meditation practice? So it's an open invitation to anxiety.

Getting a sense of whether you're interfering with the breathing or not is quite important for a lot of people. And if you feel that you are, drop it. And as you just told us, you discovered a way that you could drop it—just anchor and let the breathing do whatever it does. What I'm actually doing is allowing us to sit still and be aware of what's actually happening, to see where it's coming from.

For this reason, breathing is not suitable as a grounding object for a certain proportion of the population. Very good as a secondary object, but not necessarily good as a grounding object. One thing to watch is that it is very easy to interfere with the breathing, so that's one thing to be wary of.

Although, again, as an illustration of the variety of experience—one time I was having this discussion in a practice workshop, and one of the meditators objected. She said, "How can I tell if I'm interfering with the

breathing if the only time I know what it's doing is when I'm looking at it? So how can I tell whether that's interference or not?" And I thought, this person should be a lawyer.

This is a really good objection. I find it's a bit like that idea in quantum physics—that if something is observed, it's going to change automatically. So I do think even just being aware of the breath is affecting it somewhat.

This is something that's worthy of attention, but simply watch for it. If you find yourself getting into that sense of clinging or strain or grabbing, then step back, drop it, relax, and just be aware. You might find yourself extending the breath because you're trying really hard to pay attention. This is one of the problems with precision, particularly with the breath—you can interfere with it.

I think during my meditation boot camp in Burma, one of the things I did was, over time, create my "meditation breath." And then it took years to drop it afterwards when it was just getting in the way. But this is part of the broader issue: how can I be aware of something without interfering with it? Just simply be aware of it. And it's very, very delicate.

So don't be perfectionistic, but when you see a problem emerge, be aware of the problem and then step back. See what happens. This process is experimental. And we never get to a full conclusion, because the experience itself is constantly changing. But be playful with it. Don't take anything for granted. Just see what it is now.

So, your mission, should you choose to accept it, is to go forth and breathe. Be aware. And see what happens as a result.

Some traditions link breathing with walking meditation—one breath, one step, that sort of thing. For me that makes it far too complicated, so I don't do that; I just do the walking. But as you do the walking, what can happen is the breathing becomes very clear, and sometimes breathing and movement spontaneously interconnect. You find a distinct breathing pattern associated with a distinct moving pattern. That can definitely happen, so breathing can become part of the moving meditation. But you don't have to make it be part of the moving meditation.

When you find the breath comforting, that sounds good. It's positive because it means there's less resistance and less likelihood of getting tangled up. It helps the serenity if it's comfortable. And that's good.

Thank you very much.

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