Tracking Breathing (Practice)

Patrick Kearney · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Patrick Kearney · 49:38

This morning we're going to look at breathing as a meditation object. We'll start with some basic exercises in breathing meditation and then we'll have a discussion after that.

Organise your meditation posture. Bring awareness into your body. 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, and 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—the 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 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 shorter or longer than the movement of your out-breath? Is the movement of your out-breath shorter or longer 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?

Let's assume there are two movements, one for your in-breath and one for your out-breath. 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? Do not focus on the movements, but open your awareness to the space surrounding these movements, 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 did you find them? Where were these movements? Down below in the belly? Up at the top of the nose? Somewhere in between?

How many people found them in the belly? And is that because of habit, or did you just happen to find it there?

One student shared: "The belly, up here, in lots of places—but as soon as I started to try and focus on length, direction, all these things, it just became kind of scrambled. So figuring out where it is works, you can find a place for it. But when you try to add all these other things, it just gets completely hopelessly confused. And I guess it tightens up. Focusing in, it's not much of a job."

So what do you conclude from this?

"It's much better when I open out."

Ah, okay. So even focusing anywhere is not so good—if you open it up and just let it do what it wants to do.

"Yes, and then I just notice what it's doing."

Good. So this is very interesting, because here we have a whole series of exercises, and here we have a meditator for whom this whole series of exercises is a complete bloody disaster. They just want to keep it simple: stay up and feel the breathing.

This is normal. This is typical in the meditation world. No single approach, no single technique fits everybody. We're playing around. We're seeing what works, what doesn't work. And in terms of this experimental approach, all data is good data. You find what works for you. Where is it reasonably clear, reasonably obvious, where you can stay with it? That's the relationship you want. But here we're playing around with different aspects just to find out what's going on.

Any thoughts on directions? Where are these movements going? If you move, you move from A to B. So what's the direction?

Someone observed that there's no direction at the nostril. So what is there? How do you distinguish

between in-breath and out-breath?

"Variations of sensation."

Or the same sensation?

"I was going to say sensation is variation, but..."

Oh, that's a good answer. So just a feeling at the nostril, regardless of direction. And within that feeling, there's variations within that one feeling, or one category of feeling. There's sensation, which is... Well, that's an interesting question, isn't it? Sensation—is it one thing, or is it many?

You notice the line of the questioning. What we're playing with here is precision in the breathing. We tend to assume we know what breathing is. Yes, breathe in, breathe out. And you might have that relationship when you're practicing breathing in meditation practice. So what's your experience of breathing? I don't know. Breathe in, breathe out. Yes, that's it.

Now, if you're doing a serenity-based practice, if your aim is simply to calm the mind down, make the mind stiller, fine. That's probably good enough. But if you're practicing for insight, it's too vague, it's too general. What we want to do, and we'll talk more about this tonight, is open up the way to the perception of impermanence, the perception of change. And change means variations. So we're looking for differences. And we're doing that deliberately. This is an aspect of the precision that is characteristic of insight styles of meditation. Because if we can develop precision, we will find differences. And if we find differences, we'll find change.

"So as I settle into meditation, the breathing experience changes. It's not so much that the breathing changes, but my experience of it. It goes from here to there, from stronger to subtler. So there are those changes, but it's not the breathing itself. You know what I mean?"

Yes, I do. So you can see those changes, and eventually you can't see the breathing. It morphs over time. Perhaps this is what we've been talking about before in terms of awareness and the aware. You see the changes in the aware-ing. In the knowing. That's where you notice the changes.

"When you say insight, what do you mean? Because I have my own variations of the word insight."

We're using insight in the way the Buddha uses insight. We're going to talk more about this as we go through. But basically, it's insight into the nature and the structure of experience itself. Normally, when we talk about insight, particularly in our culture where we're very psychologized, we mean insight into the drama of my life and the drama of the lives of the people who intersect with me. And that's not what he's talking about. He's talking about insight into the very structure of experience itself. And he maps this in terms of three characteristics: change, pain, not self. We'll talk about that tonight.

Did we do length? Length is a good one. Now, with this one, I began by saying let's assume there were two

movements. When I was young, foolish, and naive, I used to say there are two movements. But one of the meditators contradicted me. She said there aren't two movements. There's one movement. It just changes direction.

So how many people would say the breathing is just one movement? It's not two movements, one for inhalation, one for exhalation. It's actually one movement. Anybody vote for that? I've got the one movement wallets forming a particular sect of Buddhism, split off.

How many people would vote for two movements? Very good. How many people would vote for something else entirely?

Now of course it doesn't matter how many movements there are. The question is really about direct awareness. And if I realize "I don't know," that's useful data. That's an experience that I'm clarifying. And that's what we're doing—we're clarifying the experience.

So if there are two, or if there's more than one, which one is longer and which one is shorter? How many people would vote for long out-breath, short in-breath? How many people would vote for long in-breath, short out-breath? Sometimes one, sometimes the other?

Once you start to talk about people's experience when they meditate, you quickly realize there's no one experience. Everybody's experience changes all the time. Everyone has their own particular experience, their own particular approach, their own particular way of receiving what comes back to them.

And it's really important to understand that there is no right experience. We spend so much time worrying: Is this right? Is this wrong? Is this what's supposed to happen? When she meditates, sometimes that happens—maybe that's what's supposed to happen. All of this is complete nonsense. What we've got is something happening. Our job is to know it, to be aware of it. That's it. That's all there is.

Did you find any boundaries? Beginnings and ends? No? Is that because you just couldn't find them, or they weren't there?

"I couldn't find... no, there were none there."

There were none there? No, there were none there. Between in-breath and out-breath? Out-breath and in-breath?

"When you prompt me to look, then I can find the boundary. Before you prompted me, I couldn't find any."

And what about afterwards? Did you then kind of forget about it? You couldn't find the boundary before I prompted you. When I prompted you, you could find boundaries. And afterwards, did the boundaries just completely disappear again?

"Yes, boundaries disappeared again."

That's interesting. You could just manipulate the experience to please the teacher. Very good.

So that actually takes us to our last question: Am I interfering with the breathing in any way? Because people find it's quite easy to interfere with the breathing.

When I started meditating, the standard instruction for breathing meditation was just "breathe naturally." Don't do anything with the breath. Just breathe naturally. Which for me was quite a challenge because I'm an asthmatic. But apart from that, years later when I did some yoga with B.K.S. Iyengar in Pune, he once poured scorn on this instruction to meditators to "just breathe naturally." He said it takes the average adult two years of hard training before they can even begin to breathe naturally. It's a meaningless thing to say.

We find that the breath is really, really easy to interfere with, and also that breath is very sensitive to changing conditions.

My state of mind changes, and my breathing changes. My breathing changes, and my state of mind changes. They're intimately connected. And you can pick up all sorts of influences when you start to be sensitive to the breath. Sometimes you can detect a state of the heart through the breathing. I know that I'm feeling agitated because I just felt it in my breath.

This sensitivity can make it quite a challenge to be aware of the breathing without doing anything to it. I went through a period, for example, where if I focused on the breathing, it would gradually get stronger over time. Then at some point I'd be distracted by thinking, and when I came back to the breathing, it was completely relaxed. So I eyeball it, I watch it, and it starts to get tense. Then I'm distracted—oh, he's gone—and it can relax again. It's quite strange. Breathing as a meditation object does have that quality, and it's something to be aware of.

Question: Could you say something about your relationship with the breath as an asthmatic? When people present with experience as an asthmatic or other breathing difficulties, the anxiety comes up. Did you have to work with that, and how did you manage?

Yes, it just took a long time. It took a long time to find a relationship—for me and my breathing to negotiate a suitable relationship. In the early stages, I found it very frustrating because people would talk about tuning into the breathing and it getting really peaceful and blissful. "Cosmic breathing! The universe breathes through me!" I'm thinking, "God, what the hell are they talking about?"

So that was a social problem because I felt I couldn't do this. Other people could do this, but I couldn't. It does require a fair bit of work and patience and adaptability. For a long time, I would use breathing only as a secondary object, not as a grounding object. And when I reached the period where I could use it successfully as a grounding object, it was controlled in the sense that I would focus down here in the belly. If the asthma's up here in the chest, I focus down here.

It makes sense that you make friends with it—that you've got a relationship with the breath. It personalizes it in some way, takes it out of the habitual anxiety eventually. It's only relatively recently that it seems we can sit calmly together, but even then I've got to be careful.

I use posture as my grounding object. That's one of the reasons why I'm so focused on posture and why I have all the exercises and stretching to develop a meditation posture—because that is actually my meditation object. I hold the body, and that involves the space, and in that space things happen, including the breathing. It's a whole body awareness rather than a specific focus, though the awareness does go to specific things. The sensations at the base are quite obvious, the sense of lift. Lift I use a lot because the tendency is to crunch over. I've got my thoracic spine that curves like this. So I'm sensitive to any of that movement and then lift up.

The posture is quite dynamic. In a sense, the posture breathes. It moves. And breath and posture start to integrate. Particularly on the out-breath, I lift up. In the exercises in the morning, when we do the posture, I say "create space between each vertebra." That's what I'm doing.

Question: I'm confused about primary and secondary object. The breath as an object, as a foundation to bring mindfulness back to the body—I'm also aware that it could be the entry point into meditation as well.

When we say primary or grounding object, we're saying this is the default position. This is the one I start with. This is the one I stay with. When I have any doubt about what I should be doing, that's what I go to. After I come out of distraction, that's what I go to. It's the basic reference point. A secondary object is occasional—it comes and it goes depending on circumstances.

Am I using that as an entry point? With that fine tuning as we've just done, and then opening out into spaciousness—I suppose it's a bit of a spectrum around just connecting you back. But when are you also using it as the entry point, or is that normally what you should be doing?

The grounding object would be your entry point, I would say. That's what you spend most time with. That's what you're most familiar with. That's what you get to know the best. And that's what takes you deeper into the concentration. So that tends to be what opens up.

Someone mentioned deliberate breathing—breathing in a way where the rhythm is driven somehow consciously, and observing that. There were two questions about this. One was how does that relate to mindfulness in walking, where you might be attending to the footsteps, somehow cooperating with the natural flow of action, perhaps very conscious of directing the speed? Does that in some way relate to deliberate breathing?

I forgot to talk about breathing when we're doing walking meditation. Some people, the way Mahasi teaches walking meditation, don't mention breathing at all—it's just movement of the body. But quite spontaneously, some people tune the movement with the breathing. Again, it's rhythm. That's what holds the two of them together.

If I had one exercise in breathing meditation, it would be: can you find the rhythm of the breathing? I've had at least one meditator who said, "I've always had problems with breathing meditation until I focused on the rhythm. And then I could find it." So you find rhythm in breathing, you find rhythm in movement. And in walking meditation, the two can come together—the rhythm of movement and the rhythm of breathing match. For some people, that's quite significant and really helps them. For other people, they don't know what you're talking about. It just depends on the person.

One person shared they'd never done this because anything that even remotely looks like trying to control the breath is a road to disaster. So they tend to leave the breath alone when doing movement, just letting it do what it does. If they don't notice it, it probably does whatever it does much better than if they do notice it.

The second part of the question related to having a very strong rhythmic sense and often finding oneself engaged with that rhythm. There's a question about whether that's "me" or whether it's just happening—to what degree is there a "me" involved?

Do you use that as a meditation object? Yes? And does it work for you? Yes. Then no problem. Clearly some part of you is in there, some part of your mind is doing this. But then, of course, some part of our mind is doing everything. So what difference does it make?

The main thing is whether it's helping you settle in. There is a whole skill of pranayama where you deliberately work on the rhythm of the breath, and apparently it can be very successful in taking you into good meditation. So if it works, it works. Meditation is supremely pragmatic. It's experimental. If you stumble across something that works, you go for it. And you can know if it works: if mindfulness is there, if concentration is there, then you're right. It's going well.

So there's nothing particularly special about getting out of the way of breathing in and of itself? No. No.

I love that.

The reason this is included here is that I once had a student who said, "Look, for years I've struggled with breathing meditation. And then one day I just realized it's happening in space." He simply tuned into the space and bang—breathing meditation was no problem at all.

Sometimes it's just a matter of experimenting until you find the relationship that works for you. What can get in the way is if you have a prescriptive instruction—"this is the way you do breathing meditation"—but it doesn't work for you. Then what do you do? You're stuck. So always take meditation instructions as invitations to experiment. Whatever you come up with that works, that's what you go for. Again, there's an element of creativity in this practice. If you squash the creativity, you're really handicapping yourself.

If we talk about breathing, we're talking about what the Buddha calls air element, which is essentially

movement. What I find useful with breathing meditation is to avoid the concept of breathing entirely. Because I'm an asthmatic—I have problems with breathing. But I don't have problems with air element. So I don't tune into breathing; I tune into air element, into movement. That concept helps. So again, the power of concept: we use the concept that helps us. Be creative with the concepts.

The basic principle, though, is to settle awareness wherever it is—movements, breath, whatever—where it's clearest and most obvious. We're trying to develop the continuity of awareness, of mindfulness. In the later tradition, they analyze all these things very carefully, and they come up with the question: what stimulates or encourages mindfulness? They arrived at two answers. One is a previous moment of mindfulness—in other words, continuity. This emphasizes the importance of continuity. But the second was a clear perception. If something is clear, it's easier to land the awareness on it and keep it there. So with breathing: where is it clearest and most obvious? That's where you go.

Then we encounter the difficulty of being aware of breathing without doing breathing. Some people don't have any particular problem with that. Others have huge problems—they say they can't help but interfere with the breathing. If you find that you're interfering with the breathing, start to get interested in the interference, not the breathing. What is the mind state that's interfering? How is this interference expressing itself? That becomes the meditation object. The breathing steps back into the background, gets out of the spotlight, and what you're looking at is this process—this determination to interfere and how it works. This is part mind as much as body.

Breathing is perhaps the most common grounding object in the Buddhist world, but it's not suitable for everybody. For some people it doesn't work because of problematic relations with breathing, or because of anxiety, or for some other reason. So don't feel obliged to use it. There are alternatives; it doesn't have to be the grounding object. Again, everybody is different.

Someone asked about helping others in their practice—how to help them get out of difficulty, to be free from their struggles. Well, it's very difficult to help other people, particularly through meditation, because meditation is something you do for yourself. But if you find someone who's willing to give it a go, and that person is motivated and interested, then there is a way.

One aspect is this: meditation can reveal the choices that we're making, the habitual choices that we don't see, choices that we feel are making us—"I'm being forced to do this." Most commonly, we see this in any form of addiction. People will say, "I'm not choosing this, it's choosing me." But what meditation provides is that it opens up the space, and we can actually see in real time: that's the point of choice. And if I can see right now that there's a choice, then there's the possibility of making another choice.

There was one retreat I was teaching here, a young woman who was struggling with addiction.

And at the end of the retreat, she came to me so happy, and she said, "I suddenly realised I have a choice." It struck her like a revelation from heaven. *I have a choice.* And as soon as that felt sense arose—I have a

choice—then the possibility of something else was there. And you can start to work your way out of the situation.

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