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The Secret of Breathing

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This essay is about something very simple and practical, and yet something that most of us pay little attention to. It is about the secret of breathing, about the truth that is hidden within it. Although we have been breathing all our life, very few of us give much consideration to the breath, to discover the truth it can reveal.

We constantly refer to the importance of paying attention to the breath in our meditation practice. If we do so, what will we become aware of? First, we may note that the breath is always coming and going. Second, we may also notice that sometimes the breath has varying qualities, such as being short, long, shallow, or deep. Beyond that, very few of us go into any detailed understanding or examination of the breath. We need to take a deeper look in order to note some things that we perhaps have not paid attention to before. We can all observe these deeper aspects of breathing, but until we pay attention to them they do not seem to exist. The Buddha said that all phenomena exist for us only when we pay attention to them. Attention brings out hidden secrets.

The Entire Truth

The entire noble truth of suffering is found within breathing. Even if you have no other practice, breathing itself can be enough to awaken you to the reality of suffering. You may ask: "How can that be? How can there be any suffering in a simple and automatic act like breathing?"

To begin with, try to stop breathing for ten minutes! Nobody can do that. Now, consider the breathing process in detail. As you breathe in and breathe out, simply give your full attention to the breath. Do you notice that when you breathe in, you experience a great deal of subtle satisfaction? What is happening? If the lungs do not have air, we become anxious. This anxiety message goes to the brain. The parasympathetic nerves immediately give a message to the lungs to pull in air as

quickly as possible. Why does this anxiety arise? Because we have a strong desire to survive, a desire to exist. That desire cannot be assigned to any one place in our brain or in our body. It permeates our body and mind. Every cell in our body has the desire to survive, and they all cooperate to give this message to the lungs and to the brain, because every cell depends upon oxygen. When there is no available oxygen the cells become agitated. This agitation is transmitted to the brain and then to the lungs: breathe!

So you can see that desire is built into us. Even at the moment of birth we have desire. When we look at a baby we might be inclined to say, "Look at this sweet baby. So innocent!" Although they are indeed innocent, they also have an enormous amount of greed. They cannot express this greed in words, but their crying can, and it will attract everybody's attention. Although a baby doesn't plan to be desirous, when it feels a need, such as hunger, desire arises. We are all born with this desire, this greed. That is why the Buddha said that the very coming into existence is suffering, that this very birth is suffering.

Therefore even our breathing can be seen to be guided by and dependent upon desire—however subtle it may be. So when we breathe in, we fulfil this subtle desire, which is mostly a subconscious desire. In contrast, if you were not to breathe for maybe two minutes, you would experience much agitation and even fear. You would then become consciously anxious. This anxiety—whether subconscious or conscious—is suffering.

Subtle Suffering

Suffering has many different levels. The subconscious anxiety associated with breathing is a very subtle level of suffering. We do not always have to experience great suffering, such as sickness and disease, to understand it. Every one of us experiences the subtle anxiety, the subtle

suffering, associated with breathing. So when we breathe in, that anxiety slowly fades away. We then experience a certain amount of satisfaction and comfort; along with a feeling of security and even a certain amount of happiness. It is not a great deal of happiness, but we feel a small sense of satisfaction, proportional to the subtle anxiety we just subconsciously felt, before breathing in.

Then, after we have mindfully breathed in, we note, as the lungs become full of the breath that just gave us satisfaction, it now brings us dissatisfaction. Why is this? When the lungs become full, we cannot hold the breath for long—maybe a minute, at best, two minutes. As we hold the breath, we feel an uncomfortable pressure in our lungs. What is happening inside? As soon as air goes into our lungs, blood cells absorb its oxygen. They go through our system, exchanging carbon dioxide for the oxygen. Now, there is carbon dioxide in our lungs and we need fresh air. The lungs cannot hold this old air for very long, before they send a message to the brain, and the brain sends out a corresponding message, “Push it out! Push it out!” If the lungs hold that breath for very long, we can begin to feel great anxiety.

Thus, the same breath that once gave us pleasure, now gives us an unpleasant pressure in the next moment. That is also suffering. That is unsatisfactoriness. As we breathe in we get satisfaction. But that breath itself is then growing old, and as it does, it has to die. Every moment of any existence brings a new moment. This happens to our body, our cells, and even our breath.

So, we alternatively experience satisfaction and then dissatisfaction as we breathe in and as we breathe out, because we have desire. The source of this desire is not lodged in our brain, but is in every cell of our body. It is desire that causes us to bring air in; it is desire that forces us to push air out. It is desire that makes us glad; it is desire that makes us sad. So, within desire itself there is a moment of sadness and a moment of gladness.

Death with Each Breath

When we pay mindful attention, we discover various truths. One truth is that we always have greed. Another truth is that there is always unsatisfactoriness. There is yet another truth: what we have called ageing. But another name

for it is *anicca*, impermanence. Because of impermanence, these feelings of gladness and sadness arise. It is because of impermanence that we have the desire to breathe in and breathe out. First, we breathe in, and since the breath is impermanent, we have to breathe again. The nature of impermanence is to force something to be repeated. When something happens it doesn't last long; it disappears and we have to repeat it again and again and again.

When we mindfully watch the breath, we come to realize that there is nothing in life we do only once. Impermanence causes things endlessly to be repeated. But you might raise the question: “What about birth? What about death? They aren't repeated.” The fact is that birth and death do not happen to us only once. We can even see that as we observe our breathing. Birth takes place every time we breathe in. Death takes place every time we breathe out.

There are three types of death. The first is ‘momentary death’; the second is ‘conventional death’, and the third is ‘death as cutting off’.

Understanding the secret of the truth of breathing and experiencing its momentary death helps us to face conventional death. When we deeply watch anything (in this case, the breath) we see that every moment is changing. There is nothing there for us to hold on to. It is all changing. When we see this truth, we come to understand that conventional death is nothing more than this temporary, momentary death. When we breathe in, we do not really know if we will die at that moment. Similarly, when we breathe out we might not be able to breathe in again. Momentary death is so natural, so real, so quick—it is happening to us all the time. If we keep our mind on this, and we understand the truth of it, then when conventional death approaches, we will not be afraid of it.

Conventional death is just going to be followed by another conventional birth. Of course, our ultimate goal is never to be born again. Instead, we seek to die an eternal death—the third type of death. Ultimately, we seek to bring the repetition of momentary death and conventional death to an end. Craving, greed, and desire must cease. Yet as long as we feel desire, whether we do something wholesome or unwholesome, unsatisfactoriness and suffering occur—and

momentary death reoccurs.

So we can see that we have all of these lessons hidden in the breathing process. The main two lessons are that there is desire, and that there is suffering caused by this desire.

End to Suffering

We can also see the end of suffering and the end of the cause of suffering in the breathing process. We see this as we mindfully watch the arising of the desire to breath in—we just let this breath come in without desiring it. Sometimes people will think they can't avoid desire, saying: "But I have to breathe deeply. I have to control my breath. That is a natural desire." That is not true. When we simply let the breath come in and go out, we can watch it, detached, without desiring anything. When we simply watch the breath as it comes and goes, we can experience durable satisfaction.

This lack of desire is true peace. Non-craving, even for the slightest thing, is an experience of peace. Real peace is the cessation of all *saṅkhāras* (conditioned things). The breath itself is a *saṅkhāra*. The cessation of this *saṅkhāra* is peace. All grasping is abandoned. When we breathe in and out, if we feel a desire, we abandon it.

The underlying tendency of a pleasant feeling is desire; the underlying tendency of an unpleasant feeling is rejection, resentment, or hatred; and the underlying tendency of a neutral feeling is confusion. Of course, not *all* pleasant feeling has the underlying tendency of desire, not all unpleasant feeling has the underlying tendency of hatred, and not all neutral feeling has the underlying tendency of confusion. How can we have a pleasant feeling without it being associated with desire?

When greed ceases and when grasping ceases, peace will then arise. That peaceful feeling is a pleasant feeling. Within that peaceful feeling there is no desire as an underlying tendency. This is what is called happiness without desire or greed. It is spiritual happiness.

Similarly, we can have spiritually unpleasant feelings, without hatred being experienced as an underlying tendency. For example, when we focus our mind on our breath, we can come to see impermanence, desire, letting go of our greed, etc. This may happen for an extended period of time, yet we still may not achieve the expected peace. If this happens, we may find we have the unpleasant feelings of not attaining peace arise, but *without* the hatred. So the meditator

understands: "Instead of getting upset and disappointed, I must make more effort." This experience can be an encouragement for the meditator to practise more vigorously, rather than getting upset. That is why it is called an unpleasant feeling without hatred as an underlying tendency. It is a useful unpleasantness which urges us on.

Glimpsing Right Understanding

If we diligently continue to follow this practice, we may find we momentarily experience the cessation of greed, hatred and delusion. This brings us a feeling of tremendous peace. It is a momentary cessation of suffering. Temporarily, we experience Nibbānic bliss, just for a fraction of a second—giving us an indication, a taste of what Nibbāna is like. For every moment that we let go of our desire, our greed, the craving to breathe, we experience the momentary bliss of Nibbāna.

We can see that by simply focusing the mind on the breath, we are on the path leading to the attainment of Nibbāna. This practice can encompass the complete Noble Eightfold Path leading to liberation. How can this be? I'm not going to go into all of the steps or factors now, but will look briefly at step number one: right understanding. When we understand this whole process of breathing, exactly as it is, we are developing right understanding. That is, we understand this is what is called suffering, in this tiny example of breathing. The cause of suffering is this little bit of greed that we have. And the end of suffering is that little peace we experience when we let go of greed. That understanding, that insight, is right understanding. We can see this in the breath itself. Simply while breathing and being mindful of it, we can gain a glimpse of it.

While on the Noble Eightfold Path, we do not always practise each step in the order they are listed. You practise each step as required. It can be compared our kitchen utensils. We have a tendency to neatly arrange these. The measuring spoon has its own place, the ladles are in their place, and the pans in theirs. We have arranged everything beautifully. But when we begin to cook, we do not necessarily use the utensils in the order in which they are arranged. We grab whatever is necessary and use it. Similarly, for the Noble Eightfold Path, the Buddha has ordered its spiritual utensils in a beautiful way. Step by step, he explains right understanding, right thinking, right speech, and so forth. But we may practise

them in a different order as the opportunity and need presents itself.

So, here is another example of the larger path being contained within the simple activity of watching the breathing process. When we follow the path, we might begin with right understanding, but we will also use whatever factor is necessary at the moment. For example, while engaging in this practice of mindfulness of breathing, we may begin with right understanding, but as we work at it, we could become drowsy. Then it's necessary to use right

effort. But then we might become agitated and need to regain our balance with right concentration. So we bring to our practice whichever factor of the Noble Eightfold Path that is necessary. And so, as we focus the mind on the breath, giving it total, undivided attention, many things unfold all by themselves. As we engage in this practice, our understanding and our mindfulness keep growing, evolving, unfolding. It is a wonderful way to glimpse the truth of existence.

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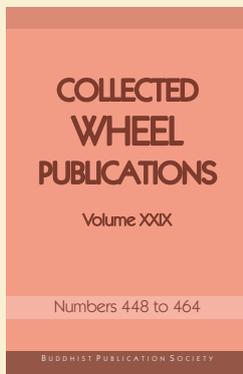
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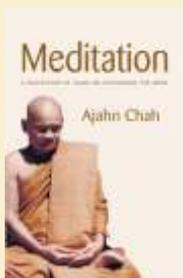
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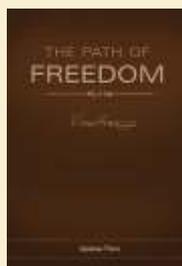
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