

Just One Breath

Coastside Vipassana Dharma Talk by Jim Bronson, July 8, 2009



Last night, July 8, 2009, Jim concluded the third and final part of his series, ***Practicing in a Precarious World***.

Notes on the previous two talks are available at

<http://coastsidevipassana.org/talkarchive/Jim%20Bronson-06-17-09.pdf> and

<http://coastsidevipassana.org/talkarchive/Jim%20Bronson-06-24-09.pdf>.

Dana, Sila, and Bhavana are the path to freedom. The path begins with the practice of generosity (*dana*), starting the long process of weakening the unawakened practitioner's habitual tendencies to cling to views, to sensuality, and to unskillful modes of thought and behavior. This is followed by the development of virtue (*sila*), the basic level of sense-restraint that helps the practitioner develop a healthy and trustworthy sense of self. The peace of mind born from this level of self-respect provides the foundation for all further progress along the path. Finally, the mind is trained to refine our intentions and our insights so that we instinctively choose the way toward freedom in every decision we make (*bhavana*).

These three practices, *dana*, *sila*, and *bhavana*, put us in touch with what is really going on. Freedom comes when illusion and delusion are dropped, and we are able to respond with skill and by choice, rather than just reacting to whatever story has entered our brain.

Bhavana is often translated as "meditation", but it also has the meaning of "development." Metta-bhavana means both "meditation on loving-kindness" and "development of loving-kindness".

Practice focuses on heart-mind (*citta*), also translated as mind-set, state-of-mind, "that which is conscious", or mental processes

Everyone has heart-mind and the intent of Buddhist practice is to awaken the heart-mind. Nirvana is the heart's release. The awakened heart-mind is bodhicitta or "Buddha Mind." It is the union of loving kindness (*metta*), compassion (*karuna*), and wisdom (*panna*). The natural expression of bodhicitta is the wish to attain enlightenment for the sake of all sentient beings. Bodhicitta is the essential experience of the Buddha nature as well as the means of realizing it. It is the true nature of the mind.

By practicing awareness of one thing, we become more open to be awareness of all things. One of the things most often selected to be the "one thing" to be aware of, is the breath. Meditation is 4,000 years old. In that period, awareness of breathing has developed a good track record. For thousands of years, practitioners have been instructed, "When you are meditating, just be aware of the breath. If your mind goes astray, bring it back, and again just be aware of the breath."

Even the best method can cause problems. One practitioner wrote the IMC Chaplaincy Council <http://www.insightmeditationcenter.org/imc-chaplaincy.html> that he was having trouble with the breath awareness practice.

*From: xxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxx
Date: Mon, Jun 29, 2009 at 1:53 PM
Subject: Meditation Question for Gil Fronsdal
To: insightmeditationcenter@gmail.com*

To IMC Chaplaincy Council

It is with great pleasure that I listen to your talks via the Zencast podcast. I always find what you have to say accessible, kind and thoughtful. For this reason I wish to ask you the following question. I have had an uncomfortable experience throughout my adult life when following my breath in meditation practice. It feels to me that the act of directing my attention to my breath causes me to become anxious about breathing. It seems to me that I can't help but to interfere with my breath despite my intention not to do so.

Richard Shankman of the Council answered:

Dear xxxxxx,

It is not uncommon for mediators to experience just what you are describing when working with the breath. Breath mediation just may not be a good practice for you. Jack Kornfield once told me he thought the breath was not a good meditation object for 15% or more of people. There is nothing wrong with them. For all of us it's just a matter of finding a suitable object. What works well for one person may not be suitable for another.

You could try to widen the awareness to take in the physical experience of the whole body breathing. By "whole body breathing" I do not mean feeling the entire body, including the arms and legs (unless that naturally happens on its own, which is fine), but to experience the parts of the body involved in the breathing. The awareness will not be as sharply focused as if on a smaller area, but will include the belly, diaphragm area, chest, nose, etc. - all at once. A softer, broader awareness. Sometimes that can help.

You could also experiment by meditating with a sense of receiving the experience of the breath, rather than directing the attention to the breath. Try it out. There is a real difference in the experience of receiving as opposed to going toward an experience. It's hard to describe but just gently see if you can make a slight shift towards receiving and see what happens.

You'll have to experiment some to see what works. I hope these general comments are useful.

with much metta,

Richard Shankman

The focus on breathing should not be too narrow. Breathing is a process, not a point in time. It takes place in different parts of the body -- in the nose, in the throat, in the lungs, in the diaphragm. Breath goes in and out, sometimes receiving, sometimes giving. Perhaps when I breath in, you are breathing out,

and vice versa. The air we breathe consists of molecules that other people have breathed – maybe even some molecules from everyone who has ever lived. We breathe to live, but in so doing, we touch everyone, and they touch us as the distinction between inner and outer fades.

A child may be told that his birthright is to know and have a father. But this is not always the case – some children never know their fathers. If a birthright does not apply to everyone, how can it be a birthright?

There are some things that *are* everyone's birthright. When we sit, focusing our awareness on our breath, a spaciousness can open up around everything, allowing the veils and fogs to drop away, and we can see clearly. Our heart-mind connects directly with everyone and everything, and the distinction between inner and outer becomes meaningless.

This inner spaciousness has been called: "The Pearl Beyond Price"; "The Unborn, the Deathless"; "Integration of the dimension of the absolute into our life"; and "deep peace."

Mysticism is a conscious awareness of an ultimate reality, divinity, spiritual truth, or God through direct experience, intuition, instinct or insight. Mysticism usually centers on a practice or practices intended to nurture those experiences or awareness.

Mysticism is NOT devotional to a doctrine or a guru - it is about direct experience within the self. Why be a Buddhist when you can be a Buddha? (Was Buddha a Buddhist?)

The direct experience with the self is familiar territory for the mystics. A mystic can be described as someone who has experienced the indescribable. There is that which cannot be put into words.

In Hinduism, Brahma is the supreme God, the Creator. However, there is a higher reality—*Brahman*. Brahman is not to be confused with Brahma -- Brahman came from Brahma. Brahman is Absolute Reality, said to be infinite, eternal, omniscient, omnipotent, and omnipresent. Brahman is indescribable in human language. If words are used, it is the deva Brahma being discussed, not Brahman.

Mystics from many cultures and centuries acknowledge the indescribable and unknowable:

One who sees everything as nothing but the Self, and the Self in everything one sees, such a seer withdraws from nothing.

For the enlightened, all that exists is nothing but the Self, so how could any suffering or delusion continue for those who know this oneness?

- Isha Upanishad: sloka 6, 7

Everything you see has its roots in the Unseen World, the forms may change, yet the essence remains the same. Every wondrous sight will vanish, every sweet word will fade. But do not be disheartened, the Source whence they came is eternal - giving new life and new joy.

Why do you weep? That source is within you, and this whole world is springing up from it...But do not think that the drop alone becomes the ocean. The ocean, too, becomes the drop!

-Rumi, sufi poet

Everything is blooming most recklessly; if it were voices instead of colors, there would be an unbelievable shrieking into the heart of the night.

- Rainer Maria Rilke

*Do not stand at my grave and weep
I am not there; I do not sleep.
I am a thousand winds that blow,
I am the diamond glints on snow,
I am the sun on ripened grain,
I am the gentle autumn rain.
When you awaken in the morning's hush
I am the swift uplifting rush
Of quiet birds in circled flight.
I am the soft stars that shine at night.
Do not stand at my grave and cry,
I am not there; I did not die.
-Mary Elizabeth Frye*

At the core of all stirs the hidden pulse of Brahman. It is the heart of everything - all that moves or breathes or blinks.

*That which is both Being and non-Being, the end of all desiring, beyond all understanding. Know that, my friend, to be the quintessence of life.
-Mundaka Upanishad*

*When a wave settles down, then it instantly recognizes
That its source in ocean - infinite silent, and unchanging - was always there.
-Deepak Chopra, M.D.*

*As rivers flow into the sea, losing their individuality, so the enlightened,
no longer bound by name and form, merge with the infinite, the radiant Cosmic Being.
-Brihadaranyaka Upanishad*

*But the holy stream of Sound, the Holy Stream of Life (life force, vibration), and the Holy Stream of Light, these were never born, and can never die. Enter the Holy Streams, even that Life, that Light, and that Sound which gave you birth; that you may reach the kingdom of the Heavenly Father and become one with him, even as the river empties into the far-distant sea.
-Jesus, Essene Gospel of Peace, from aramaic*

*Tell them I Am that I Am... I Am has sent me to you.
-Exodus 3: 13-14*

In filling a pipe, all space (represented by the offerings to the powers of the six directions) and all things (represented by the grains of tobacco) are contracted within a single point (the bowl or

heart of pipe), so that the pipe contains, or really is, the universe. But since the pipe is the universe, it is also man, and the one who fills a pipe should identify himself with it, thus not only establishing the center of the universe, but also his own center; he so "expands" that the six directions of space are actually brought within himself. It is by this "expansion" that a man ceases to be a part, a fragment, and becomes whole or holy; he shatters the illusion of separateness.

-Black Elk

For thirty years I went in search of God, and when I opened my eyes at the end of this time, I discovered that it was really He who sought for me.

-Bayazid Al-Bistami, Translations of Eastern Poetry and Prose

Insight opens your mind. An open mind leads to an open heart.

Openheartedness leads to justice. Divinity is oneness with Tao. Oneness with Tao is freedom from harm, indescribable pleasure, eternal life.

-Tao Te Ching

Know the Universe as your self, and you can live absolutely anywhere in comfort.

Love the world as your self, and you'll be able to care for it properly.

-Tao Te Ching

Quit flapping your gums about God. The most beautiful thing which a person can say about God would be for that person to remain silent from the wisdom of an inner wealth.

-Meister Eckhart

It is better to see God in everything than to try to figure it out.

-Neem Karoli Baba(Guru of Baba Ram Dass)

When one sees by insight that all things are selfless, then one wearies of misery; this is the path to purity and freedom.

-Gautama Buddha

Only one reality seems to survive and be capable of succeeding and spanning the infinitesimal and the immense: Energy - that floating, universal entity from which all emerges and into which all falls back as into an ocean; energy, the new spirit; the new god.

-Pierre Teilhard de Chardin

An Authentically empowered person is humble. This does not mean the false humility of one who stoops to be with those who are below him or her. It is the inclusiveness of one who responds to the beauty of each soul, who sees in each personality and in the actions of each personality the soul incarnate upon the Earth. It is the harmlessness of one who treasures and honors and reveres life in all its forms.

-Gary Zukav, *Seat of the Soul*

That thou mayest have pleasure in everything, seek pleasure in nothing.

That thou mayest know everything, seek to know nothing.

That thou mayest possess all things, seek to possess nothing.

That thou mayest be everything, seek to be nothing.

-St. John of the Cross, *The Ascent of Mount Carmel*

Unconditional love is the experience of being. There is no "I" and "other" and anyone or anything it touches is experienced in love. You cannot unconditionally love someone. You can only be unconditional love. It is not a dualistic emotion. It is a oneness with all that is.

The experience of love arises when we surrender our separateness into the universal. It is a feeling of unity. You don't love another, you are another. There is no fear because there is no separation. It is not so much that "two are as one" so much as it is "The One manifested as two". In such love there can be no unfinished business.

-Stephen Levine, *Who Dies?*

It is impossible for our limited minds to grasp the unlimited infinite One.

So the finite mind takes a little part of the infinite that it can understand and says "this is God for me". It's something like ten people going to the sea with ten different containers and taking some seawater.

-Swami Satchidananda

The Only Being has opened to you the way of religion that the One commanded Noah to follow. It is the same faith that we have revealed to you and that we showed to Abraham, Moses, and Jesus, so that true religion might continue in the earth. Do not divide yourselves into sects.

-Quran (Sura 42: 13)

Do you really have to fret about enlightenment?

No matter what road I travel, I'm going home.

-Shinsho

Even though the infinite is indescribable and unknowable, we can touch it, we can perceive it. Opening our heart-mind to that which is greater than ourselves starts with just one breath. One breath is the door to freedom. One breath is not just one breath, but if followed, is One.

When sitting, and following just one breath, notice the spacious awareness. Compare it to your normal life – does the rest of your life seem rushed, full of hasty decisions, cut corners, and shortcuts?

Intuitive spacious encompasses awareness. All we have is our awareness: may we be alert to what is most important/skilful.

Awakenings is a non-fiction book by neurologist Oliver Sacks. It chronicles his efforts in the late 1960s to help patients at Beth Abraham Hospital in the Bronx, New York who had been victims of the 1920s encephalitis lethargica epidemic, and who had been unable to move or speak for forty years. Sacks discovered that the then new drug L-DOPA brought these people back to awareness from their paralysis. The book inspired a play by Harold Pinter (*A Kind of Alaska*) in 1982, and was also made into a 1990 Oscar-nominated film, *Awakenings* starring Robert De Niro and Robin Williams.

Sacks was inspired to dig deeper into the condition of these patients when he noticed that some of them were able to respond slightly. One patient would catch a ball when it was thrown.

Without any warning whatsoever Sayer [Sachs] tosses a tennis ball at her. Her hand suddenly jerks up out of her lap and catches it. And stays there, stiff, still.

Sayer is delighted but the expression on [Dr.] Kaufman's face is that of one who has long ago learned and tired of simple card tricks. Dismissing the phenomenon —•

DR. KAUFMAN: A reflex.

SAYER: If she batted it away I might call that a reflex. She doesn't bat it away, she catches it.

DR. KAUFMAN: - It's still a reflex.

SAYER: I'm sorry, if you were right I'd agree with you.

Kaufman, understandably, takes some offense at the comment. Sayer, however, is unaware that he has caused any.

SAYER It's as if . . . having lost all will of her own on which to act, she borrows the will of the ball.

Awkward silence. Eventually—

DR. TYLER The "will of the ball?"

Sayer nods. Kaufman and the other doctors concur with glances that the theory and theorist are absurd.

Despite the scoffing of his colleagues, Sacks continues to investigate, eventually finding the miracle cure of L-DOPA.

Lucy, the patient who had the will of the ball, woke up, and became aware that she had been “away” since she was 22, over forty years before.

I can't imagine being older than 22. I've no experience at it. I know it's not 1926. I just need it to be.

Tragically, L-DOPA is a temporary miracle –the patients slowly return to their previous paralyzed state, with full awareness of what is happening. Sacks is wracked by guilt for having restored them to awareness, only to see it taken away again.

Dr. Sayer: You told him I was a kind man. How kind is it to give life, only to take it away?

Eleanor: It's given to and taken away from all of us.

Awareness is a precious gift, not to be wasted. Awareness of just one breath gives us our true nature, and gives us life beyond limits of this body.

Mindful

Mindful

Every day

I see or hear

something

that more or less

kills me

with delight,

that leaves me

like a needle

in the haystack

of light.

It was what I was born for -

to look, to listen,

to lose myself

inside this soft world -

to instruct myself

over and over

in joy,

and acclamation.

Nor am I talking

about the exceptional,

the fearful, the dreadful,

the very extravagant -

but of the ordinary,

the common, the very drab,

the daily presentations.

Oh, good scholar,

I say to myself,

how can you help

but grow wise

with such teachings

as these -

the untrimmable light

of the world,

the ocean's shine,

*the prayers that are made
out of grass?*

~ Mary Oliver ~

The Path of Purification, an ancient Buddhist text and guide, was written in answer to a short poem:

*The world is entangled in a knot.
Who can untangle the tangle?*

It is to untangle the tangle that we begin meditation practice. To disentangle ourselves, to be free, requires that we train our attention. We must begin to see how we get caught by fear, by attachment, by aversion-caught by suffering. This means directing attention to our everyday experience and learning to listen to our bodies, hearts, and minds. We attain wisdom not by creating ideals but by learning to see things clearly, as they are.

... There is a sign outside a casino in Las Vegas that says, "You must be present to win." The same is true in meditation...

- Jack Cornfield