

Natural Meditation

The dharma student, practicing mindfulness of breathing, strives to keep his mind on his breath throughout the course of the day. As the Buddha indicates, he maintains his mindfulness in all his postures, all his activities. In describing the process, the Buddha says that the practitioner should continue to keep his mind on breath and body “when going forward & returning ... when looking toward & looking away... when flexing & extending his limbs... when carrying his outer cloak, his upper robe, & his bowl... when eating, drinking, chewing, & savoring... when urinating & defecating... when walking, standing, sitting, falling asleep, waking up, talking, & remaining silent...” (MN 10)

We like to call the practice of keeping the breath in mind in daily life: “natural meditation.” In natural meditation, the dharma student makes an effort to maintain his mindfulness of the breath and body in all the situations of his life.

By maintaining mindfulness of the breath and body, the dharma student keeps himself centered, in the present moment. He remains connected to the qualities of ease and skillful internal pleasure.

In practicing natural meditation, the dharma student makes a resolve: he resolves to maintain mindfulness of the breath, to the best of his ability, in all postures, at all times. “To the best of his ability” is a key aspect to his approach. He’s going to do the best he can. He understands that he won’t be able be mindful of every breath he takes; he understands, in fact, that he’ll forget the breath a good percentage of the time, he’ll “miss” a lot of breaths. He

understands that in making an effort to be mindful of the breath and body throughout the day, he's engaging in a gradual process. He recognizes, in making his resolve, that there will be many occasions when he won't be able to maintain his mindfulness; but at the same time, he vows to make an effort to be mindful of the breath at all times, wherever he is, whatever he's doing.

In setting his resolve, the dharma student understands that he's going to practice natural meditation because it will lead to an alleviation of his suffering; he's going to do his utmost to keep the breath in mind out of compassion for himself. And, he realizes, he's going to make this effort out of lovingkindness, in support of his wish to have a greater happiness in his life.

As he moves through his days, the dharma student makes an ongoing effort to keep his mind on the breath. He seeks to maintain his mindfulness of the breath when he's at work, when he's in relationship with friends, when he's attending to his children, when he's talking with his parents, and so on. He keeps the breath in mind.

When he's involved in taking certain actions, he may have to put much of his attention on the action. When, for instance, he's walking along a city street or driving a car, he has to bring a good degree of mindfulness to what he's doing. But the breath is always there. He maintains some awareness of the breath. As the Thai meditation teacher Ajaan Buddhadasa puts it, he practices "mindfulness with breathing."

At times, depending on what he's doing, the dharma student may notice the breath every now and then. When, for instance, he's listening to somebody speaking, he has to keep the main part of his focus on what the person is saying; but every now and then he can touch in to the

breath. When he's speaking, he has to put an even greater emphasis on what he's doing, what he's saying; but he can still keep the breath in mind.

Sometimes, when engaging in a particular activity – when, perhaps, he's walking along a quiet road – the practitioner is able to make an effort to keep a good portion of his attention on the breath and body. Other times, when he's involved in a more complex activity – listening to somebody speak or reading or writing – he might direct his attention to the breath at intervals. Or he might have a background awareness of the breath. But in all circumstances, he makes an effort to keep the breath in mind.

Generally, in natural meditation, we'll put the mind on the breath at the same place in the body where we felt the breath in walking meditation. Generally we'll be mindful of the breath at a spot somewhere in the middle of the body. A spot at which we'll be able to maintain our center of gravity, our connection to the earth. A spot at which we'll be able to access an easeful, pleasurable breath.

In practicing mindfulness of breathing, as we move through our days and nights, we remember the breath. Mindfulness, again, is remembering. Remembering, as we've explained, is a mental process. It's a function of internal verbal fabrication. Which is to say, simply, we tell ourselves to remember what it is we want to remember. In the case of natural meditation, we tell ourselves, again and again, as we navigate our lives, to keep the mind on the breath. As in sitting and walking meditation, we use internal verbal fabrication. We guide our attention, in a proactive manner, to the breath. We use whatever kinds of fabrication work for us – words in the mind or visual images – in our efforts to keep our attention there.

The more we use fabrication in the service of keeping the mind on the breath in all our postures, the more we'll remember to keep the mind on the breath.

The more we remember, the more we remember.

In developing the skill of natural meditation, the dharma student makes a concerted effort to use directed thought. He's proactive. He applies internal verbal fabrication, in keeping the mind on the breath. He says the words. "Be with the breath." "Mindful of the breath." "Mindful." Or he fabricates some kind of visual image.

It's very important, in natural meditation, to use internal verbal fabrication. It's important to say the words. In practicing natural meditation – in practicing breath meditation – we're training the mind. We're developing new habits of mind; we're cultivating a habitual way of thinking that's in our best interests. It's by using internal verbal fabrication, by actively generating skillful fabrication, that we change our patterns of thinking. If we don't purposefully fabricate skillful ways of thinking, we won't be able to change our thinking; we'll continue follow our familiar pathways of thought.

We could say that, in using fabrication in natural meditation in an effort to keep our attention on the breath, we're digging a new track in the mind. Most of the tracks in the mind lead us away from the breath. Now we're digging a track that will take us there. Those other tracks, the tracks that take us away from the present moment, are deep, well-travelled. Our inclination is to follow those tracks. For that reason, if we're going to keep our attention on the breath as we go through our days, we're going to have to dig a pretty deep track in the mind. We're going to have to do a good amount of digging; we're going to have to keep using fabrication. Again and again. Day after day. Month after month. Year after year.

Digging this new track in the mind is slow, gradual work. It requires determination, the capacity to stay with it over a period of time. In developing the skill of natural meditation, what's required more than anything is that we stay with it. We keep practicing. We remain committed to the practice.

It is a process. It is a gradual process. The Buddha often spoke about the gradual way that dharma practice unfolds. In one analogy, he compares the development of dharma practice to the ocean floor, the way it very, very gradually slopes, until it eventually reaches a significant drop-off, until there's a considerably notable change.

"Just as the ocean has a gradual shelf, a gradual slope, a gradual inclination, with a sudden drop-off only after a long stretch; in the same way this Dhamma & Vinaya has a gradual training, a gradual performance, a gradual practice, with a penetration to gnosis only after a long stretch."

(Ud. 5.5)

It's important for dharma students, learning to practice natural meditation, to remember this. The practice develops gradually, slowly. It's important to remember that it takes time to dig new tracks in the mind; it takes time to change the habits of a lifetime.

Sometimes, when we make an effort to practice natural meditation, we're able to feel the breath only a couple of times during the course of the day. Sometimes an entire day goes by and we fail to remember to keep the mind on the breath. But if we stay with it, the practice will

develop. Gradually, it will develop. Gradually, we'll remember the breath with greater frequency. We'll become more and more able to keep the breath in mind.

If we stay with it, if we keep making a wholehearted effort to remember the breath within the structures of our lives, if we keep digging, the mind will gradually incline to the breath. Before, the mind followed other tracks, it inclined to other things, pain in the body, thoughts about our jobs and relationships, thoughts about the past and future, regrets and worries and concerns about our worldly lives. But as we develop our skill in natural meditation, the mind begins to incline, instead, to the breath.

Over time, we begin to notice that the inclination of our awareness changes. In the situations of our lives, the mind moves to the breath: when we're sitting at our desk at work, when we're on the train, when we're in the waiting room in the dentist's office, when we're eating dinner, taking out the garbage, going to sleep.

After awhile, the breath, we realize, is always there, keeping us centered, in the present moment, at ease, informed by a quality of well-being.

As we practice the steps of breath meditation in formal meditation, as we practice walking meditation, as we practice natural meditation, we gradually become able to maintain the qualities of ease and pleasure in all postures, as we partake in the activities of our days and nights.

Gradually we develop the ability to call up an easeful, pleasurable breath in whatever conditions of life we find ourselves in. As in walking meditation, in natural meditation we generally don't "cultivate" the breath; rather, we remember the kind of easeful, pleasurable breath we've learned to cultivate in sitting meditation, and we "find" that breath. At first, in the situations of daily life, we're able to call up an easeful breath every now and then; but as we go

on, we're able to connect to the easeful, pleasurable breath in just about every circumstance, no matter where we are, no matter what's going on.

In the same way, gradually we become able to connect to a full body awareness in the natural meditation mode. And, gradually, we become able to call up the easeful flow of breath energy in the body. Gradually, we become able to have a pleasant abiding, in all postures, as we go through the day.

As we continue to practice, we become more and more able to maintain skillful internal pleasure. Even when we find ourselves in typically stressful situations, in an emotional dialog with a family member, working to finish an important work project, attending to a dying parent, we're able to call up the qualities of ease, well-being, pleasure. We're able to reside in a pleasant abiding.

Gradually, we become able to call up the quality of skillful internal pleasure in all the circumstances of our lives, whenever we choose. This, as the Buddha often noted, is a mark of attainment in breath meditation practice. This is what we aspire to: to be able to call up skillful internal pleasure at will.

When we've reached this stage in our practice, we've developed the skills that will enable us to have a skillful relationship to pleasure. And, in turn, a skillful relationship to life.