

## **Focusing on the Breath As Being Open to What Is**

How can we focus on the breath in our practice, and, at the same time, be open to what is? If this is a problem for you, please read on.

The question implies that it is difficult to do both at the same time. But being open to what is and focusing on the breath – are they really in opposition to each other?

The breath is a natural and fine focus for entering zazen because it is a basic physical activity that we are always already doing – whether we think about it or not. Further, breathing from the belly is especially helpful to get out of our heads, with all the mental chatter, and become physically centered in the body itself.

In the beginning, focusing naturally on the breath (being one with the breath, simply not separating from it) requires conscious attention and discipline. This is because we are used to wandering in thought, rather than being present. Being one with our breath is not really difficult; the difficulty lies, rather, in our wandering minds.

In zazen we are simply open to what is – we don't need to do anything with it, neither manipulate it or otherwise turn it into anything in our minds. And focusing naturally on the breath is a superlative entrance. Not thinking about the breath, or anything else, but actually being one with THIS PRESENT, EMBODIED BREATH.

And yet, sensations, like pain in the knees, or phenomena, like the ringing of church bells, arise. Focusing on the breath, one may take these as distractions: "I am trying to focus on the breath, but all that's there is this pain in my knees. It hurts and I don't know how to get rid of it. It's preventing me from concentrating!" In this way of going about things, there is concentration on the breath – and anything else that arises is considered to be a distraction from this effort. Often, approaching practice in this way, one merely becomes tired or unfocused in the endless effort to mechanically return to concentration on the breath to the exclusion of all else.

Focus on the breath, however, is not really separate from being open to what is. Our breath is where pain and other sensations, and sounds and other phenomena, may simply be as they are, arising and passing. The focus on the breath does not exclude them. They are not distractions and so there is no need to DO anything with them. Again, what if thoughts come to mind? Let them be as they are; they too will dissolve of their own accord. Simply breathe and you will see.

Nothing is excluded. Not even pain. Remain open to it without turning it into something. No need to compare, judge, grasp or push it away, or otherwise control or change it. Right there, as the pain, simply BREATHE. No need to focus harder on the breath in order to exclude the pain. Be patient. As trust in the practice develops, this will happen naturally.

A delicate point: sometimes you may find yourself trying to change what is – comparing, judging, and pushing away. *Moving those painful knees, or fighting not to.* Nothing excluded, not doing anything more, simply breathe through this too.

As practice matures, this focus gathers a tremendous, yet settled and stable, vitality that can be applied to the matter at hand. The focus seamlessly turns to what needs attention. Very helpful in daily life. It is also the foundation for genuine koan practice or *shikan-taza* (sitting through).

Returning to the cushion, we do not begin our practice but simply continue it, now in the seated posture. When we get up from the cushion, we do not end our practice but simply continue it, now in movement. When something calls for our attention, we naturally turn to it and do what needs to be done. And when nothing calls for our attention, naturally return to the breath. The breath and whatever calls for our attention – including thinking – are found to be not-two.

If you continue to struggle with this even after doing a retreat, see what is wrong and correct it. If you still need guidance, someone who has mastered it will be happy to guide you.

*Inspired by a question that Su Hwa Liang Tan posed in response to comments Jeff Shore made at the January 2017 USA retreat, where he described the practice of zazen as "being open to what is." Out of practice, Su raised the question: how can you focus on the breath, as is our practice, and, at the same time, be open to what is? Su again raised this issue with Marty Applebaum, and Jack Vartabedian and Jeff Shore joined in together to try to clarify the matter. This offering, then, is the result of our mutual concern into the question posed, all of us learning in the process.*

Su Hwa Liang Tan  
Jack Vartabedian  
Marty Applebaum  
Jeff Shore

For further reading on this subject (you can search, for example, for "breath") see here:

<https://beingwithoutself.files.wordpress.com/2015/05/spring-2015-retreat-lectures.pdf>

<https://beingwithoutself.files.wordpress.com/2014/11/summer-2014-retreat-lectures.pdf>

<https://beingwithoutself.files.wordpress.com/2013/02/exhortations-for-those-who-do-part-2and3.pdf>