

# Imagine

*April 20, 2003 - Ven. Thanissaro Bhikkhu*

Psychologists have done studies of people who've mastered skills, trying to figure out why some people are simply very good at a particular skill while other people really master it. One of their discoveries is that for people to really master a skill, it has to capture their imagination. They like to think about it. They like to try different ways of conceptualizing the skill, approaching the skill, applying the skill in unusual and unexpected ways. And although we often don't think of imagination as being involved in meditation — in fact, we think that meditation is anti-imagination — actually that's not the case. To master concentration, it has to capture your imagination, just as with any other skill.

When you practice concentration, what are you doing? You're creating a state in the mind. That requires imagination. The noble eightfold path as a whole is something fabricated, something put together. It brings you into the present, but when you get into the present you discover how much input your intentions have in each present moment. The practice of the path is designed to make you more and more sensitive to that fact: to see how you put things together, how you can put things together in a way that creates suffering, or how you can get more skillful at putting things together in a way that creates less and less suffering until finally you reach a point where the whole thing gets taken apart and there's no suffering left.

But to get to that last point you have to understand what you're doing. You can't simply make up your mind that you're going to be totally uninvolved in the present moment and simply be an observer without participating, because what happens is that your participation goes underground. You don't see it, but it's still there. So, instead, you have to be very open about the fact that you're shaping the present moment simply by choosing what you focus on. That's a decision right there: The sensations you choose to focus on, and the way you focus on them, are going to shape your experience of the present moment. You're creating a state of becoming — the Pali word here is *bhava* — and although one of the things we're trying to learn to overcome is the process of becoming, we can't simply drop the process. We have to understand it before we can let it go. We have to understand it to the point of dispassion and then let go. To do that we have to keep creating more and more and more of these

states, but we have to create a type of state that's comfortable to stay with, easy to analyze, easy to take apart — which is why we practice concentration.

A senior monk in Bangkok once asked Ajaan Lee, "When you're practicing concentration, aren't you creating states of becoming in the mind?" And Ajaan Lee responded, "Yes, that's precisely what you're doing." He went on to say that you can't take the process apart until you can do it really well. He said, "It's like having a hen that lays eggs. You use some of the eggs to eat, while the others you crack open and take apart." In other words, part of the role of concentration is to keep the mind nourished on the path. The other part is to give you something to take apart, while at the same time putting the mind in a position where it can take these present states apart.

So when you're conscious of that fact, look at the way you put the present moment together. You have choices you know: different things you can focus on, different ways you can focus on them. If you focus on the breath, you discover that there are many different ways of conceiving and monitoring the breath: your way of labeling the breath sensations, the way you decide when an in-breath is long enough, when it's too long, when it's too short. A lot of these decisions get put on automatic pilot, but as you're meditating you have a chance to examine them. You can look at them carefully and adjust them to see if there are more skillful ways of deciding how long a good long in-breath is, what signs indicate that the breath is just long enough. The same holds true with the out-breaths, the depth, the rhythm, the texture of the breath.

There's a lot to play with here, and the word "play" is important because you've got to enjoy the process. Otherwise there's no enthusiasm for the meditation; you simply go through the motions because it's time to meditate. And when there's no enthusiasm, no joy in the process, you have a hard time sticking with it. The mind is going to lose interest, get bored and try to find something else to think about, something else to fill up the hour. And what you end up doing is filling up the hour with filler — straw, shredded paper, and Styrofoam peanuts — things that are not nearly as helpful as learning about the breath. The reason we're here is not just to put in time. We're here to see how the mind is creating unnecessary suffering for itself and to learn how to stop doing it.

One helpful way of understanding the process is to look at the ways psychologists have analyzed imagination. They've discovered that it involves four skills. The first is being able to generate an image in the mind — simply giving rise to an image of one kind or another. The second is to maintain the image. The third is to inspect it, look at its details, explore some of its

ramifications. And then the fourth ability is to alter the image, making changes and then inspecting it again to see what happens as you alter it. And although the psychologists who discovered these four skills were concerned primarily with mental pictures in the mind, you'll discover that any kind of creative work — writing, creating a tune, whatever — involves these same four steps.

When you compare the four steps to concentration, you find that they apply here as well. In fact, they correspond to the four bases of success: desire, persistence, intentness, and ingenuity.

In terms of concentration, the first step corresponds to giving rise to a nice pleasant state right here in the present moment. Can you do that? If you want to, you can. As the Buddha said, all phenomena are rooted in desire. So how are you going to use desire to give rise to that pleasant state? You can adjust the breath. You can adjust your focus. Breathe in such a way that gives rise to a pleasant feeling in at least one part of the body.

Then the next step, once you've learned how to generate that state, is to maintain it, keep it going. And you'll discover that you need mindfulness, alertness, steadiness to do that. Sometimes you find it's like surfing: The wave changes beneath you, but you learn to keep your balance. In other words, the needs of the body will change, but you can keep that pleasant sensation going in spite of those changes. When you first sit down, the body may need a fairly heavy rate of breathing in order to feel comfortable, but then as it feels more comfortable, the body's needs will change. And so you have to learn how to ride that change in the wave. Adjust the rate of breathing so that it's just right for the body right now, right now, right now. This makes you more and more sensitive to the fact that the body's needs change, but you can learn how to maintain a particular balance as you get more and more sensitive in responding to those needs, in giving the body the kind of breathing it wants. Of course, the body's not going to sit there saying, "I want this. I want that," but you get more and more sensitive to the signs, the sensations that tell you that certain parts of the body are starved of breath energy, and you can consciously breathe into them.

The third step is inspection. You look at the state you have in the body: Are there places where it's still uncomfortable, places where it still feels tense, where it feels tight? Well, you can think of ways to change the breath. That's the fourth step. The third and fourth steps play off each other in this way: Once you change things, you inspect them again to see if the change has made any improvement or if it's made things worse. If it's made things worse, you can try another change. Keep inspecting, keep adjusting. In Pali this is called *vicara*, or

evaluation. And as things get more and more comfortable, you find that the range of comfort you've been able to create for yourself begins to expand. You can breathe in with a sense that the breath energy in the body is connected in all its parts. You breathe out and the energy feels connected; your awareness keeps filling the body, saturating the body.

After a while you get to a point where you really can't improve the breath any further. It's just right as it is. As Ajaan Fuang once said, it's like pouring water into a water jar. You finally reach the point where you've filled the jar and no matter how much water you try to add after that, you can't get it any fuller than that. So you stop adding water. The same with the breath: When you reach the point of fullness, you stop making so many adjustments, so many changes. You can just be with the breathing. From this point on it's more a question of how the mind relates to the breath, whether it feels that it's separate from the breath and watching it, or whether it's more immersed in the breathing. As it gets more immersed, the rate of breathing is going to change, not so much because you made up your mind to change it, but simply because you've changed your relationship to the breath.

As you get more fully immersed in the body and breath, you develop a sturdy feeling of unification and ease. The breathing will grow more subtle to the point where it finally stops, not because you've forced it to stop but because the mind has slowed down enough to the point where it needs less and less and less oxygen. The oxygen exchange at the skin is enough to keep the body going so that it doesn't have to keep pumping in, pumping out. Ajaan Lee compares this state to an ice cube with vapor coming off of it: The body feels very still, but around the edges there's a kind of effortless vapor that you feel with the in-and-out breathing. Then after a while even that stops and everything is perfectly still.

All of this comes from creating that spot in the body where it feels good to stay focused. Then learning how to maintain it. Then inspecting it to see where you can expand it, where you can make it more stable. And then adjusting it in various ways: using your imagination to think at least of the possibility that the breath could be more comfortable, the breath could saturate the body. You could think of all the cells of the body being bathed in the breath — whatever way you have of conceiving the breath that makes it more and more comfortable, a better and better place to stay.

In this way the four aspects of imagination apply to what you're doing right here, even though you're not trying to create a mental picture. Sometimes there *will* be mental pictures behind it, but you're more concerned with the actual

sensation of the breath as you feel it coming in, as you feel it going out, as you play with it, as you create a sense of very intense wellbeing right here. Even though it's something created, something fabricated, it's a good thing to create, a good thing to fabricate. As the Buddha said, right concentration is the heart of the path. The other factors are its requisites. And for discernment to do its work of insight in the present moment, the heart of the path has to stay healthy and strong. You have to create and maintain a good solid basis through concentration.

So because it's a created state, you have to be creative about it, imaginative about it. And you find that the more your imagination opens up to the possibilities already present, the more new possibilities your imagination opens up. As long as you're frank about the process, that you're creating this state, you don't have to worry about getting attached to it — even though you probably will get attached to it — because deep down inside you know it's something you've created, and eventually you'll have to take it apart. But in the mean time, learn how to do it well. The more solid the concentration, the more you want to stay here. The more you stay here, the more familiar you get with the territory. And it's through that familiarity that the practice of concentration turns into the practice of insight, the kind of insight that can liberate you. Without this stability and familiarity, your insights are simply ideas you've heard from Dhamma talks, read in books, notions you've picked up from outside. They don't seep deep into the mind because the mind hasn't softened up the territory here in the present moment. Only through the practice of concentration can the hardness in the present moment begin to soften up and give the insights a chance to seep deeper and deeper.

So when you have this kind of understanding about what you're doing, you find it a lot easier to go about it. And you begin to realize it's not a mechanical process. It's a creative process. That way it can capture your imagination. When it captures your imagination, you get more interested in what you can do with the breath, not just when you're sitting here with your eyes closed, but any time of the day. How you deal with the breath, how you get centered in the breath can help you deal with anger. It makes you more sensitive to what anger does to the body, and you can breathe through the physical manifestations of the anger so that you don't feel like they've taken over.

When there's fear, you can try using the breath to deal with fear. Get in touch with the physical side of the fear and breathe right through it. Notice how the breath can help deal with boredom, how it can help deal with illness, how it can help deal with pain. There's a lot to explore here. And as the possibilities of

the breath capture your imagination, you find that this skill is useful, not only when you're trying to sit with your eyes closed, but also wherever the present may be, wherever you may be in the present. Whatever the context, whatever the situation, you find that the breath has something to offer — if you explore it. And to explore it, you have to get a sense that it can capture your imagination. It gives you that kind of challenge, along with the sense of reward that comes when you've explored something and discovered something new, a valuable skill.

This is how meditation can start permeating your whole life. When it permeates your whole life, when you're more and more familiar with it, that's when the insights arise: unexpected insights sometimes, insights that you won't always find in the books, but very personal, very much relevant to how you relate to events in the body and mind. And you realize that they've come to you because you've opened up your imagination to what's possible with the raw materials of the present.