

Explore & Experiment

November 2, 2022

As you focus on the breath, try to think of it going all the way down to your feet. Obviously, this is not the air coming in and out through the nose. It's the flow of energy in the body. It's a part of our awareness that tends to get obscured because we're interested in other things. All the interesting things in the world, we think, are happening outside. We tend to focus on the body only when it's in pain or having a panic attack, so we have a very rudimentary knowledge of our own bodies. We have a very small vocabulary to describe what's going on in the body as we feel it from within.

So, it's good to think about how the Buddha explained that. When he talked about the body as it's being experienced, he divided it into *dhātu*, which can be translated as property, element, or potential. There's earth, or solidity; wind or breath, which is energy; water, coolness; and fire, heat. Think of these things as elementary properties in your sense of the body—potentials that can be highlighted or put into the shadows. Here, for the time being, we're trying to highlight the breath element, the breath property, the breath *potential* in different parts of the body.

Now, that potential actually originates from within. We think of the breath coming in from outside, but that's the *air* coming in from outside. The breath energy originates in the body. You can think of every cell breathing in, breathing out. Notice where the movement of the energy seems to be smooth and where it seems to be interrupted. Ideally, it should flow smoothly throughout the body. The different organs all get nourished as they're allowed to breathe in, breathe out.

Where there's tension or tightness, it's a sign that the breath is not flowing well. So, we can think of the breath either going through those patterns of tension or, if it's a line of tension, it either goes through the middle of the line or it starts at one end of the line and goes down the line to the other end.

Allow parts of the body that seem to be starved of breath energy to have their share. Sometimes you have a sense that some of the muscles are doing most of the work of the breathing, and they get tired after a while, so think of the breath coming in other parts of the body. Let the muscles that are doing most of the work have a little vacation, and you'll find that other muscles will pitch in.

Years back, when I had malaria, I found that the muscles involved in breathing were getting really, really tired. They lacked oxygen because the malaria parasite was eating up all the oxygen in the blood cells. So I thought deliberately of the breath entering in the different spots that Ajaan Lee says are the "resting spots" of the breath: the middle of the forehead; the

top of the head; base of the throat; just above the navel. That relieved a lot of the tiredness, as other muscles pitched in.

So, there's a lot to explore here. This is one of the ways of developing concentration: You develop it through interest. The Pali term, *citta*, literally means *mind*, but it can also mean really being interested in what you're doing, being intent on what you're doing. If you see that this is an interesting process—how the energy flows through the body, something you haven't explored much before—it makes it easier to stick with it.

Otherwise, it's just in-out, in-out, in-out... then the mind is going to go out and stay out. But here's something very intimately related to your sense of the body as you feel it from within. You come to see that you're carrying around a lot of tension that you don't have to, and here's a way of relieving it.

Nobody's forcing you to breathe in an uncomfortable way. Think of the breath as free medicine. You can breathe any way you like. You can think of the breath any way you like that you find interesting. If you have any chronic pains or illnesses, ask yourself, "What kind of breathing would be good for that? What would help to relieve the pain or help to treat the illness?"

As Ajaan Lee points out, there are some illnesses that are related to how you breathe. Then there are conditions that come from other causes, but you can still treat them with the breath.

He himself formulated his method for teaching breath meditation based on an experience when he had gone into the forest: He walked in for three days and finally arrived at the spot where he and another monk were going to spend the Rains, which was going to be three months. Soon after he arrived, though, he had a heart attack. He had no medicine, and the food was actually bad for his heart. Most of the hill tribes people there ate nothing but bamboo shoots. Bamboo shoots are really bad for your heart.

So what could he do? Well, he had his breath. So he worked with the breath energy, and realized that there are various ways you can think of the breath coming in and out of the body that actually help to soothe the heart, *treat* the heart. At the end of three months, he was able to walk out after having used the breath as his only medicine. So think of the breath as medicine. It's food in that it provides a sense of ease and well-being, medicine in that it can treat your illnesses.

So, explore to see what perceptions of breath energy seem to help. You can think of the body being bathed by the breath—you're surrounded by it. If you have a tendency to slip off in your meditation, focus on areas that are deep down in the body: down at the base of the spine, down through the legs, down through the feet. Have a sense of being solidly grounded here. Ajaan Fuang used to talk about how he liked to sit on the ground when he meditated, with a sense that his spine was rooted deep down into the ground.

As you can see, there's a lot to play with in terms of your perceptions—the images you hold in mind. Some people might complain and say, "I thought we were here to see the reality of things." Well, the reality of things is that your perceptions shape your experience. If you're trained not to see something, you won't see it. If you are trained to see it, you'll see it.

Here we're trying to use perceptions that help us stay, that help create a state of concentration, that allow us to get interested in the breath—to explore this body we have, from the inside.

When the Buddha talks about the causes of suffering, there's one way in which he expresses dependent co-arising that goes down to consciousness on one side, and *name-&-form* on the other side. *Nāma-rūpa* is the Pali. Form, of course, is the four elements or properties. Name covers, among other things, acts of intention, attention, and perception. If you're ignorant of these things as they function in your mind, it's going to lead to suffering.

But here, as we focus on the breath, we're playing directly with them. Your intention is to stay here. Your attention: You pay attention to the breath. As for perception, you can play with the perceptions to see how different perceptions will have an effect on your concentration.

Ignorance is not so much ignorance of things as they *are*, it's more about how things *work*. And this is one way of learning about how perception works—by experimenting with it.

It's like learning about any kind of food. You can take an egg, set it on the table, and just sit there and watch it for a while. You learn a few things about it that way, but not very much. But if you take it into the kitchen, put it into a pan, put it into a steamer, put it into different treatments—boil it, fry it, scramble it—you learn a lot about eggs. And you get some nourishment in the meantime. You get to eat the eggs.

Here you're learning about perception, but you're also learning how to get a sense of well-being through perception.

You're also learning about how you pay attention to things. You learn about how once you set up an intention, other intentions will come and bounce against it. You learn how not to follow those other intentions. As you learn to stick with this intention to stay here, you get a state of concentration: nourishment for the mind.

So, explore this sense of the body as you feel it from within. At the same time, you're beginning to explore the acts of the mind as they relate to how you feel the body from within. So you get both *nāma* and *rūpa*, both name and form.

It's through exploring these things that the Dhamma becomes yours. We're not here just to hear the Dhamma that the Buddha taught and then try to confirm that "Yes, that's true." Think about how the Buddha himself learned the Dhamma: It was through exploration: trying this, trying that. That's how things become clear.

So, think of the meditation as an opportunity to explore and an opportunity to experiment—with these basic building blocks of how you sense your body, how you sense your mind from within.

You learn at the same time as you're nourished. It's like when you're learning how to cook: You learn about the food, and you get your nourishment out of the food you've made.

Of course, the analogy breaks down: With the body and the mind, ultimately we want to gain freedom from these things, but in the meantime we have to learn how to use them. Only when you use them can you understand them, and only when you understand them can you use them to set yourself free.