

Breath Meditation

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One of the convenient things about the breath as a meditation topic is that it's with you wherever you go. It's always there to tap into. The important thing is that you *remember* to tap into it. It's easy to get lost in other worlds—worlds of thought, worlds of emotion, issues of the past and the present—but the breath is always there, waiting for you. Whenever you feel a need to let the mind settle down, it's always at hand.

The important thing is the relationship you develop with the breath. To begin with, it's good to be on friendly terms with it. All too often, people develop an adversarial relationship with their meditation object. But if you're on bad terms with your breath, you're really bad off. So keep reminding yourself: "This is the breath of life. This is what keeps the mind and the body together." And it only stands to reason that if the breath is in good shape, then other things will go well in life as well. The body will feel good; the mind will have a good place to stay when the breath is comfortable. So learn to get to know the breath. Be on friendly terms with it.

In fact, you can develop all four of what they call sublime attitudes toward the breath. And it's good to have them right there in your breath. Otherwise, they become abstractions. Words. I once heard some people talking about the problems they had with equanimity, but what they were actually talking about were the problems they have with the *idea* of equanimity. But if you can learn how to embody equanimity along with friendliness, compassion, and empathetic joy with the breath, then you don't have to worry about your reactions to abstract ideas. You start learning when which of the four embodied qualities is appropriate in your relationship to the breath.

The attitude of friendliness is always a good baseline. You always wish for the breath to go well. Compassion can translate into when the breath is not going well: How do you help it? You don't just leave it on its own. Try to figure out why the breath is uncomfortable. Is it a physical cause, or is it more of a mental cause? Allow the breath some space to come in comfortably, go out comfortably. Don't keep it tight and constricted. And don't force it too much. When we talk about adjusting the breath, some people tend to squeeze it here, squeeze it there, and push and pull it as if it were taffy. But often all you have to do is just think, "longer," or think, "shorter," or think, "all throughout the body," and simply the power of the thought will allow the breath to move in those ways.

As for empathetic joy, that's for when the breath is going well. You maintain it. Give it the space to keep on going well. Help it along to see if it can go better. If you're taking time out of your daily schedule when you're away from the monastery, don't begrudge the breath that amount of time. Because remember, if you let the breath have its space, it can be healing both for the body and the mind. Then, when you leave meditation, don't leave the breath. Take it with you. You find that when you're breathing comfortably as you go through the events of life, even in the midst of difficult situations, you've got your ally here, someone who can help you.

So develop some appreciation for the breath for what it can do. On the one hand, if you've got a good breath going, you've got something good to feed on. Often we go through our lives looking for nourishment to make the mind feel good, and we look for our nourishment by trying to feed on this or that person's words, hoping that that person will praise us. Or we feed on our projects going well. But a lot of times these things just don't happen. If we're trying to feed off of what another people say, we end up feeding off of their garbage. As Ajaan Lee would say, we're feeding off of the words they spit out, whereas if the breath is going well, you can sit there feeding off that comfortable feeling inside. You look at the words other people are spitting out, and they just stay right there on the ground. You're not hungry, so you don't have to pick them up; you don't have to swallow them. You don't have to let the mind be the vacuum cleaner that it ordinarily is, just picking up the dirt that's all around it. You've got something better to feed on.

As for equanimity, there are times when you really can't do much about the breath. No matter how much you work with it, it doesn't seem to improve anything at all. That's when you have to develop your equanimity. Say: "Okay, just be with the breath as it is." Give it some time. Let it work itself out.

The funny thing is that when you develop these attitudes toward the breath, you're also developing healthy attitudes toward other parts of the mind. You'd be amazed how people can be really rough on themselves—or maybe you wouldn't be amazed, you can see it in yourself—in a way that's harmful. But when you use your breath as your medium for relating to different parts of the mind, different emotions coming up in the mind, you've got your tool, you've got your friend here. It's taught you when to be friendly, when to be compassionate, when to be empathetic, when to have equanimity. Once you develop those skills with regard to the breath, you can use them in your own inner relationships—and in your relationships with other people. The ideas of these qualities become embodied in actual skills that you've developed in the mind, a sensitivity you've developed:

when to be proactive, when to be more passive, and what ways to be proactive are really helpful both for yourself and people around you. When you learn how to relate to the breath in this way, it's *always* there to relate to in that way. Get in touch with it, and the relationships are there. The sensitivity you've developed inside is there, and you can use all these good qualities in dealing with the world around you.

So don't think of the breath as simply a place where you go to hide. Remember that in learning to deal with the breath, you develop skills, you develop attitudes, ways of relating, that are useful in all areas of your life—if you take the time to pay the breath the attention it deserves.