

Remarkable Qualities

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The object of our meditation is something pretty unremarkable: just the breath coming in, going out. It's been with you ever since the day you were born. Oftentimes, it gets shoved off into the background. There are lots of other things you want to think about, look at, and listen to, and if the breath gets in the way, you just block it out. What's going to make it remarkable is what you bring to it in terms of the qualities of mind you apply to the meditation.

It's like the seeds of a redwood tree. The seeds are awfully small and, in and of themselves, nothing very remarkable. But if they happen to fall at the right place in the forest floor, get the right conditions, they grow into huge trees that last for a long time. And so it is with the breath. If you bring the right qualities of mind to it, it's going to turn into something remarkable, a real home for the mind, something you can really depend on, to carry you through all kinds of difficulties.

The Pali word for meditation, *bhavana*, means to develop. It's in developing the qualities of mind that we bring to the breath that the breath is going to develop as well. This is how the mind develops. It's like exercising your body. If you want to be strong, you don't have wait around until you get sent a strong body in the mail. You take whatever strength you have and you use it. That's what strengthens the body. In the same way, you take certain qualities of mind you already have and you use them, you apply them to the breath. This is how they develop. This is how they grow.

The first quality you want to bring is desire: the desire to do the meditation. This has to be built on, one, seeing the drawbacks of not doing the meditation, and two, seeing the advantages of doing it.

The drawbacks are all around us. We look at what a mess the world is in because of human greed, anger, and delusion. And we realize that greed, anger, and delusion lie not only out there in other people, but also in our own minds as well. All you have to do is look at your life, and see the times when these defilements have taken over and ruined lots of potentially good situations. As long as the seeds of these things are still the mind, you can't be really secure about the future.

As for the advantages of the meditation, those are many as well. They're harder to see, because there're not that many people out there who have meditated skillfully enough to get remarkable results. So the examples are not all around us. But the examples are there. And you can think about the issue briefly: Think of

what it would be like if your mind were stronger in terms of mindfulness and alertness. These are the qualities that help you in any situation. If you were to do your work with more mindfulness, more alertness, whatever the job, it would come out a lot better. The results would be a lot more worthwhile.

So here's an opportunity to develop those skills. When you can catch yourself in the midst of giving into greed, aversion, or delusion, and can stop yourself, you see what a valuable skill that is. Think about the fact that aging, illness, and death are bound to come, and as the chant just said, the world offers no shelter. There may be doctors to help with your illnesses, but they can only help so much. The question is, what are you going to do with the when the doctors *can't* help you? What strengths will you have to draw on? Here's a chance to develop those strengths.

So once you see that this is a worthwhile activity, the next step is to be persistent, really sticking with it. Stay with the breath every time it comes in, every time it goes out. If you find yourself wandering off, just bring yourself right back. Don't let yourself get discouraged. The longer you can stay with the breath, and the more continuous your awareness is, then the more those good qualities of the mind get developed, and the more you'll be able to see what's going on in the mind.

This is where the next quality comes in, which is intentness. Really focus all your attention on this. How much have you observed your breath in the past? What do you know about the breath aside from the fact that it comes in and goes out? Actually there are lots of variations to the breath: in long, out short; in short, out long; long in and out; short in and out; heavy, light; shallow, deep; fast, slow. Try to explore the variations in the breath and see what feels good for the body right now. And be very, very sensitive to what feels good. The more you allow yourself to be sensitive here, the more absorbing the breath becomes.

This leads to the next quality, which is circumspection. Keep close tabs on what you're doing and on the results you're getting, and if they're not what you want, well, you can change. Use your ingenuity to think of different ways of breathing, different ways of focusing. Those principles in the seven basic steps in Ajaan Lee's guide to meditation are very broad principles that allow a lot of room for variation. There's nothing to say that you have to breathe in a particular way. You're encouraged to figure out what kind of breathing feels good right now. What kind of breathing do you like right now? Well, give yourself that kind of breath. Then see if it really is what you want. If it's not, you can change again.

The whole purpose of this is to improve your powers of observation, your powers of perception, your powers of judgment, your powers of evaluation,

because ultimately you want to turn them on to the mind, to evaluate what's going on in the mind. But the mind is a lot subtler than the breath. So first you exercise your powers of observation with the breath.

Get so that you're a real connoisseur of your breathing. Here it is: something that's free. It hasn't been privatized yet. Nobody's going to take your breath away and then try to sell it back to you. You've got it right here. Here's an opportunity to develop this resource inside that you can ultimately use in all kinds of ways. You'll find that when you're tired, if you've really been observant about your breathing, you know ways to breathe that will give you more energy. If you're feeling tense, you'll find ways of breathing to relax. When you're feeling hot or cold, you have ways of breathing that make you feel more comfortable.

When you're angry, there are ways to breathe that get rid of the sense that you've just got to get the anger out of your system. Instead of bottling it up or letting it all out, you can breathe in a way that feels relaxed all the way down to your fingertips, all the way down to your toes, and the sense of feeling stifled by the anger will go away. Then you can actually look at the anger as an event in the mind, without all the physical symptoms getting in the way.

There are lots of useful skills connected with the breath. And the breath can do all kinds of things for you aside from just keeping you alive by going in and out. If you really pay close attention, you find it really is something remarkable—this energy flow we have in the body. It all depends on bringing the right qualities: the desire to learn about the breath; persistence in just sticking with it; and using your intentness, and your powers of ingenuity and circumspection. As you bring these qualities to the breathing, the breath will develop into something remarkable. The mind will begin to develop into something remarkable as well. It's all a matter of what you give to the practice.

We all come to meditation hoping to get something out of it, but one of the main lessons we have to learn is that you're not going to get anything out of it unless you start giving a lot into it. But the things you give into it are qualities you already have to some extent. It's simply a matter of putting them to use, exercising them here with the breath, so that they become strong. That way, these qualities of mind which at the beginning may not seem special remarkable themselves, will become remarkable, to the point where you learn how to depend on them to deal with all the life and death matters you're going to have to face.