

The Language of the Breath

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There are many ways in which learning how to meditate is like learning how to master a foreign language. Speaking a foreign language is not simply a matter of speaking. You also have to learn how to evaluate what you say, evaluate what you hear from the native speakers. That requires training your ear. The training of the ear here is the factor of evaluation. As Ajaan Lee notes, the evaluation factor in concentration practice grows out of alertness in mindfulness practice—in other words, your ability to be sensitive to what you're doing and to the results of what you're doing. The act of evaluation builds on that as you learn how to adjust, to see what's working, see what's not working, first as you try to get the mind to stay with its object, and then as you learn how to adjust both your focus and the object.

In this case, the object is the breath. The breath is one of those unusual bodily functions that's both automatic and can be willed. So it's an ideal object for learning how the factor of will enters into your experience. But it's also an ideal object for screwing yourself up. If there's too much will and not enough observation, you can force the breath into all kinds of weird configurations. So you have to learn how to listen, to watch. Again, it's learning how to read a foreign language. How do you read the language of the mind? How do you listen to the language of the mind, the language of the body?

On the one hand, you can learn lessons from outside, as when you have a teacher who's teaching you the foreign language. But it's not simply a matter of mastering the grammar. You also have to master how to apply the grammar to a particular situation, a particular sentence. For people learning English, one of the big problems is learning when to use the word "the," when to use the word "a," and when you don't to use any articles at all. There are rules, but they're pretty complex. The way to master them is to listen to native speakers speak and then try to say what you want to say, learn when "the" comes in, and when "a" comes in. At the same time, listen to advice from the native speakers so that you do it right. Because what may seem right from your interpretation of the grammatical rules may not actually work out in practice. After all, no natural language is totally consistent. So you learn by trying, trial and error. And you also learn by trial and success.

It's the same with meditation. We take the meditation instructions and then we apply them. We start by learning how to adjust things and evaluate things on

our own. What's working, what way of focusing on the breath puts you to sleep, what way of focusing the breath can wake you, what way of focusing on the breath can develop too much tension in different parts of the body, what ways of focusing on the breath can relieve that tension. Part of that comes from evaluating it on your own; part of it comes from getting advice. But ultimately you also have to learn how to evaluate the advice, to see what's working for you, what's not working for you. It's a balancing act, as is every skill in the world.

What helps you progress in language learning, and the same goes for meditation, is this power of evaluation, as you learn how to listen to yourself and make adjustments. This is the beginning of discernment.

Discernment starts out with simple things, like: Which way of breathing feels best for the body right now? As you work with that question, you find yourself getting more and more sensitive to the breath energy in the body. Exactly what does it mean, this "breath energy" in the body? What are the different ways it has of working?

You can look at Ajaan Lee's instructions on breath meditation. He started out with one method, and then after a while, worked out a second method that he developed after he'd had a heart attack. Many of his instructions in that second method for dealing with the breath energy in the body are perfect for people who are having heart problems. But then you read some of his later Dhamma talks and you see that he sometimes switches everything around.

For example, in Method Two, he talks about spreading the breath down the back: starting with the base of the skull, down the spine, and out the legs. But in one of his later Dhamma talks, he talks about the breath energy that comes up from the soles of feet and goes up the back all the time, whether you're breathing in or breathing out.

What this means is that a large part of learning the language of the mind and the language of the body is having lots of different ways of conceiving the body, conceiving the breath energy, and figuring out which way is going to work at which time. If you find something causing tension, something causing problems, learn how to reverse it. The instruction on breathing in at the base of the skull is good for people who tend to try too hard to pull the breath in from the nose. That can create a certain pattern of tension, with a lot of tension building up in the back of the neck and shoulders. Breathing through the back of the neck and down the backbone is one way of relieving that tension.

But then you might try to pull the breath down in the lower back, and sometimes that can be a problem. So you switch around. Think of the energy coming up from the soles of the feet, up through the spine, and up out of the top

of the head. Ajaan Fuang used to recommend sometimes in your mind's eye cutting off the top of your head, leaving it wide open, to see what that does to the breath energy in the body.

In other words, there's a lot to play with here. And what makes the playing a useful part of the meditation is your ability to evaluate the results: How does this help, when is this useful, when is it not useful? Again, you can get some advice from others, but a lot of your skill has to come from your learning how to evaluate your own powers of evaluation as you develop a more and more refined sense of what works, and what it *means* for a technique to "work."

This segues right into the development of discernment, as you can see which motions of the mind are helpful, which emotions are not helpful, which ones add to the stress, and which ones help to relieve stress. In other words, you're starting to see the motions of your mind in terms of the framework of the four noble truths: cause and effect, skillful and unskillful.

As you start evaluating the motions the mind not only as they relate to the breath, but also as they relate to everything else—how they relate to the contact of forms and eyes, sounds and ears, aromas and nose, tastes and tongue, tactile sensations and body—you learn how to evaluate what you build on the basis of those contacts. That's all a matter of evaluation as well. You can't hope to be told simply, "Well here's a meditation technique," and then just beat the mind into submission with the technique, hoping that some sort of discernment will come out of that.

The whole point of practicing concentration is learning how to read the mind, reading cause and effect, and developing your sensitivities to cause and effect—and particularly to your actions as causes, and the results in terms of stress or lack of stress. That kind of sensitivity can be developed only by working with the breath, playing with the breath, and evaluating the results of what you get as you play, as you work.

Again, it's like mastering a foreign language. An important part of being able to speak a foreign language is learning to listen to what you say with the ear of that other language. As in learning Thai, learning how the falling tone should sound, learning how the rising sound should sound, learning long vowels, short vowels, and learning when you break the standard rules, as when you know what happens to the tone, say, at the end of a sentence.

So as you're meditating, remember: You're learning a new language here. After all, what is the language of the breath? That's one area where our experience doesn't lend itself to the vocabulary we have in English. So you have to listen to it on its own terms. Develop the ears and eyes, the inner ears and eyes, of a person

who's really sensitive to the breath. That way, your inner ears and eyes can get more and more sensitive to your own mind. You learn how to read the mind, until eventually your discernment develops qualities called knowledge and vision. And here again, Ajaan Lee makes the connection that the vision is seeing what's going on, the knowledge is realizing what it means. That comes from your ability to be alert, to see connections, and to evaluate, see what works, what doesn't work. That's what it means to master the language of the mind, learning how to use the mind so that it doesn't cause suffering. It's one of the most difficult skills of all, but also the most worthwhile.