

At Home with the Breath

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One of the traditional terms for concentration practice is *vihāra-dhamma*, a home for the mind, a dwelling for the mind. The verbs for different states of *jhāna* show what you do: You enter and dwell. You make yourself at home. So here's the breath, coming in and going out. That's going to be your home for the next hour. And as they say, it takes a heap of living to make a house a home. In other words, you want to find some way of breathing that's good to settle into, something you find comfortable.

Of course, it has to build on a solid foundation. This is why precepts are an important part of the practice. It's not that you simply stick meditation into any old ways of living at all. There are certain ways of living that are conducive to allowing the mind to settle down comfortably, and others that are not. If, in your day-to-day actions, you do things that are harmful, then as soon as the mind gets quiet a little bit, you start thinking about the harmful things you did. It's like reopening an old wound. Either that, or you start denying that you did anything wrong, and that's like developing some hard scar tissue there. Either way, it's not a good place to settle down.

At the same time, when you observe the precepts, you're developing the good qualities of mind that you need in the meditation. To begin with, you have to be mindful of your precepts, in other words, keep them in the mind. You've made this promise to yourself that you're not going to steal, you're not going to lie, you're not going to kill. You have to remember that.

Then you have to be alert to watch what you're actually doing. If you begin to see that your actions are going against the precepts you've promised yourself you're going to uphold, you have to stop.

So the act of observing the precepts is a kind of meditation. It develops qualities of mind like mindfulness and alertness.

Then you bring them to focus on the topic of your meditation, such as the breath coming in and going out. Here you add another quality from observing the precepts: ardency, which means you really try to do this skillfully. In other words, as soon as you notice you've slipped off, you bring yourself right back. And you learn the skill of coming back without a lot of self-recrimination, without a lot of discouragement. You have to be businesslike about it. The mind slipped off? Okay, bring it back. Slipped off again? Bring it back again. The mind's habit for a long time has been to wander around—who knows for how long?—and when you

suddenly make it stay at home, it's going to resist. So you have to keep bringing it back, bringing it back. But when you bring it back, make sure you bring it back in a way that's solid and comfortable at the same time, because if bringing it back becomes a chore or something unpleasant, it's going to get harder and harder to bring it back.

So each time you come back to the breath, ask yourself: Is the breath as comfortable as it could be? What would be a better way of breathing right now? Ajaan Lee gives lots of recommendations in Method Two, and those are just to get you started. He developed that method right after he had had a heart attack and he needed to pull himself together. He was out in the forest, he had walked three days over mountains to get to the place where he was going to spend the rains retreat, and soon after he got there, he had a heart attack. He knew the only way he was going to get out of there would be to walk back. He didn't have any medicine, he was far away from any kind of help, so he had to rely on himself to pull himself back together again physically.

So he started working with the breath energy in his body. And the way he worked with it eventually got written down into Method Two, starting with the breath energy in the back of the neck, going down the spine. I've known some people with heart problems who say that that's precisely what you need. It works through the tension that tends to build up in the neck and shoulders when you have heart problems.

But not all of us have heart problems. We have other problems: weak backs, digestive problems, tension in different parts of the body. We're trying to figure out what way of breathing or conceiving the breath is good for that particular problem. If you have problems with a weak back, you might want to visualize an energy that comes up solidly from the soles of your feet, up through your legs, and up your spine, an energy that keeps coming up both with the in-breath and with the out-. See what that does. Or if you have headaches, focus your attention down in your chest, and think of the excess energy in the head coming down through your throat and into the chest and out into the air.

There are lots of ways of playing around with the breath energy. It's very malleable. Often the limiting factors are, one, our imagination, and two, the steadiness of our concentration, our ability to keep a particular concept of the breath in mind, which can be limited by our level of mindfulness and alertness. The important thing is that you keep trying. As long as the breath is not yet comfortable, try to find ways of changing the rhythm, changing the texture, changing your conception or perception of the breath, the way you label it, the

way you have a mental picture of what's going on in the breathing process. You can change all of these things to see what you find easiest to settle into.

Now, as the breath gets comfortable, try to spread that sense of comfort so that it radiates out, fills the body. This way, you find it easier and easier to settle in and enjoy the meditation. If there's no enjoyment, it's going to be hard to stay. The mind will keep resisting, wanting to go out someplace else and find something more interesting to think about, to look at, to imagine. So to fight that tendency, you give it a really nice place to stay.

Again, it's like staying in your house. If you have lots of entertainment in the house, lots of good books to read or a good entertainment system, you feel less and less inclined to go out and demonstrate in the streets, to get into trouble on a street corner, or to get run over by a car, because as you stay at home, there's lots to keep you occupied at home.

Of course, we do this not just for a pleasant abiding in the here and now, but that is an important part of the meditation. When the mind has a sense of well-being in the present moment, you tend to be a lot kinder to yourself, a lot kinder to people around you. It's a lot easier to develop the attitudes we know we should develop toward others—i.e., goodwill, compassion, empathetic joy, equanimity when that's called for—when you're coming from a sense of well-being.

As you're working on concentration, don't be in too great a hurry to move on to the next stage. Learn to occupy this place, dwell in it, settle in, or, as the texts say, enjoy it, indulge in it. Because it gives you a greater sense of well-being right here, right now, you feel less and less inclined to go looking for scraps outside.

At the same time, as you get used to having this greater sense of well-being inside, it makes you more sensitive to what the mind is doing. This is how concentration leads to insight. After all, what is insight all about? It's seeing the unnecessary stress that you add to experience. You're not going to see that until you get very sensitive to how easeful things can be. It's like living in a big city. When there's a steady background hum, you'll never know what real quiet is. You have to go out someplace where it's so quiet that you can actually hear the blood going through your ears: That's when you know what quiet is.

The same way with the mind: If you want to know how much stress you're adding to things, try to make things as comfortable and easeful as possible inside. That way, when the mind moves in a particular way—out of greed, anger, or delusion—and creates a sense of stress inside, you'll see it. It's no longer obscured by the background hum.

So this ability to create a sense of ease in the present moment to make this house of the body into a home is important not just for the sense of ease and well-

being it creates right now. It also changes the center of gravity in your life. If you're the sort of person who's creating a lot of tension inside all the time, it's easy to go out and create trouble for other people as well. But if you've got this sense of well-being that you can tap into, you're much less inclined to want to cause anybody else's suffering. You get more sensitive to the subtle ways in which you do cause unnecessary burdens for the people around you. Like the old principle of the oxygen mask: You've got to put your mask on first, not because you want everybody else in the plane to suffocate, but because you've got to make sure you're in the right position to put on other people's masks without fainting. You've got the strength and the clarity to know what the causes of happiness can be, so you can be a good example to others.

At the same time, you get more and more sensitive to the very subtle ways in which movements of the mind function. Ignorance, fabrication, all those things you read about in dependent co-arising: You actually begin to see them because you're more quiet, in the same way that you can hear subtle sounds when you're more quiet.

So this is a form of the ease and well-being that, as the Buddha said, is blameless, i.e., you're not harming anyone else, and at the same time it's a kind of pleasure that carries clarity with it. All too often the pleasure that we search for in life is under a fog. When we try to find our happiness in sights, sounds, smells, tastes, or tactile sensations, you can say it's under a fog. Or in terms of the Fire Sermon we chanted just now, there's a lot of smoke and it obscures your vision. If your happiness depends on somebody else's suffering, you're not going to want to see their suffering. You're going to pretend it doesn't matter, or it doesn't exist, or that *they* don't matter, or what you're doing really isn't causing them any harm. In other words, you blind yourself so that you can continue enjoying that particular kind of pleasure. So if you really want to see things for what they are, you've got to develop a pleasure that comes from within. It doesn't take anything away from anyone else; it doesn't require you blind yourself. That's precisely what right concentration offers.

So do your best to use your mindfulness and alertness and your ingenuity to figure out a way to make the breath a home built on a solid foundation, with a good view and a good entertainment system inside. A place where you can really settle in and stay.