

A Recipe for Jhana

February 14, 2009

When you meditate, try to be very conscious of holding a particular perception in mind. In this case, it's very simple: the perception of the breath. That's all you have to think about.

As you sit here, being sensitive to the body, be sensitive to it as breath. Just think, as you feel your energy in the body, that it's an aspect of breathing. Any flow as the breath comes in, the breath goes out: It's all breath. And, looking at it as breath, be sensitive to how it feels coming in.

If you've ever had bodywork done, sometimes you'll notice: As a muscle gets released, as its tension gets released, something you took for granted all along—that that part had to be hard, had to be solid, had to be held—you suddenly realize it didn't have to be. It could be released. It could be relaxed. You change your perception of it.

It's the same way with focusing on the breath: Think of everything you feel in the body as being related to breathing, part of the breath energy. That's the breath energy coming in and going out. There's also the breath energy that's just there in the body, regardless of whether the breath is coming in or going out or being still. Just breath, breath, breath. Hold that perception in mind.

And be sensitive to how comfortable the breathing feels. What kind of breathing feels best right now? The best way to answer that question is to allow yourself to breathe in different ways for a while. Think, "long breathing," and see what happens. Then you can think, "shorter breathing," to see how that feels, and decide which one you prefer. You can think "deeper" or "more shallow," "heavier," "lighter."

As you get more sensitive to the breathing in the body, think, "whole body." Try to be aware of the whole body all the way through the in-breath, all the way through the out-, from the top of the head down to the tips of the toes. You'll find that your awareness has a tendency to shrink, so be very careful to remind yourself each time you breathe in, "whole body"; each time you breathe out, "whole body." Try to notice what effect the breath has on your sensation of the body. Sometimes breathing will feel good in the arms. Sometimes it will be related to tension, say, in your shoulders, in your back, in your legs. So you've got a wide range here to be sensitive to. What ties it all together is that one perception of "breath, breath, breath." And that's the recipe for meditation.

You can also call it the recipe for jhana.

The descriptions in the Canon, when the Buddha talks about meditation, fall into two kinds. There are the how-to recipes and then there are the description of what you get at the end of how-to. It's like the different kinds of writing on food. Some authors will give you the recipes, saying, "You do this and you do that," and you get the dish that you want. Other authors—such as restaurant critics—like to talk about the finished product. It's important that you not mistake the two kinds of writing for each other. In other words, you can't use a restaurant review to figure out how to cook the dish that's been described. For instance, you hear about soufflés and a restaurant critic would say, "Well, the soufflé wasn't very good because it was heavy. That other soufflé was better because it was light and airy." You

see the word “airy,” so you go to the kitchen and you bring in your air compressor. You try to pump air into the eggs. What you get is a mess all over the walls.

Or you might try to reverse-engineer a dish. You tasted something and you figure out what this must be—based on what you know about the various foods you’ve encountered. If you’re a really good cook, you can reverse-engineer some things, but there are also disasters. For instance, years back somebody in Thailand came to America and had a salad with mayonnaise dressing. The person went back to Thailand and decided to re-create the dressing. He knew it was white, it was creamy. Condensed milk was well-known in Thailand, so he reverse-engineered the dressing based on what he knew: a salad dressing based on condensed milk. That became the standard salad dressing through Thailand. All through my early years there, whenever you went to a restaurant that had Western food, if they had a salad, it would have a dressing based on condensed milk. It was awful.

So be careful when you meditate not to read the descriptions of the finished product as a recipe. In other words, you read about how jhana has directed thought and evaluation, and pleasure and rapture and singleness of preoccupation, so you try to bring all those things together. You make them the object of your meditation. But that’s not how you get the mind to settle down. You get the mind to settle down by focusing on the breath, with some very simple instructions: Be sensitive to when the breath is long, when it’s short. Once the breath is comfortable, spread your awareness to fill the whole body and then notice how the breathing has an impact on the way you experience the body. Try to calm that impact, so that the breathing feels smooth and easy, doesn’t create tension as you breathe in, and you’re not holding on to tension as you breathe out. Your sense of holding a body here in the present moment gets lighter and lighter.

Just notice how the breath has an impact on the body: That’s all you have to do. You don’t have to think about directed thought or evaluation, you don’t have to think about pleasure or rapture. Just think about being sensitive to the breath, being sensitive to the whole body. Then notice how the sense of the breath, as the Buddha said, fabricates or has an impact on your sense of the body, and do what you can do to calm it down.

There’s a story that Luang Por Phut tells about when he was a young novice staying with Ajaan Sao. Ajaan Sao was a man of few words. He would say, “Meditate on the word *buddho*.” People might ask him, “What does *buddho* mean?” He’d say, “Don’t ask.” “What’s going to happen when meditating on *buddho*?” “Don’t ask. Just repeat the word in your mind.” You’d go back home, try it, and then come back to tell Ajaan Sao, “Okay, when I do this, these are the results I have.” He would tell you whether you were heading in the right direction or the wrong direction. Then he would tell you how to go from where you’d been.

In other words, he wasn’t interested in explaining everything beforehand. He was interested in giving the recipe, not the restaurant review. As Luang Por Phut said, as a young novice he would read the books that Ajaan Singh had written. Now, Ajaan Singh tended to be more elaborate in his discussion. He’d say, “Establish mindfulness.” So Luang Por Phut would go and ask Ajaan Sao: “Ajaan Singh says to establish mindfulness. Why don’t you say, ‘Establish mindfulness’ in your meditation

instructions?” Ajaan Sao would say, “If you just start repeating the word *buddho* and keep it in mind, that’s establishing mindfulness right there. You don’t have to go into long descriptions.” He’d just tell you how to do it.

It’s by focusing on “how to” that you get the best results. Ajaan Fuang was a similar sort of teacher. He’d give you basic instructions and send you off to meditate on your own. If you had any speculative questions about the meditation, or you wanted to check what kind of jhana you’re attaining, he wouldn’t be interested. He’d just say, “Stay focused on the breath. Tell me what the breath feels like as you stay focused on it.” If it felt heavier or whatever, he would say, “Okay, in that case do it this way, or think of it that way,” to guide you along the path, without giving you a lot of advance notice about what was going to come up further along the path.

You’d find that you’d start getting results without having to think about the books. Later on, as you started experiencing different things in the meditation, it was convenient to have those maps, to have those restaurant reviews, to get a sense of where you were, so that you could sort out the terrain in your own mind. But it was best to have some experience first before you got obsessed with the descriptions. Otherwise, you start squeezing things in line with your preconceived notions, and of course, what are your preconceived notions based on? They’re based on ignorance.

Ajaan Thong, who is now the abbot of Ajaan Lee’s monastery, gave an example once of a person who has an unripe mango in his tree. His friends tell him, “You’ve got an unripe mango. It’s green, it’s hard. What you want is a ripe mango, which is soft and yellow.” So the guy goes and paints the mango yellow and squeezes it to make it soft. But he doesn’t get a ripe mango. What he gets is a mess. You don’t focus on the mango. You focus on the roots of the tree. You water them. You give them fertilizer. The mango will take care of itself.

This way, you learn an important lesson: Things happen according to causes. Get the causes right, and the effects will have to come. At the same time, the Buddha’s instructions get you developing both insight and tranquility as you practice. As you’re aware of the whole body, it’s hard to think about anything past or future as you’re spreading awareness to fill the whole body. The more you inhabit the present moment, fully inhabit the body in the present moment in this way, the harder it is to go thinking about past or future. That helps with the tranquility.

Then, when you start looking at how the breath has an effect on the body, you’re learning to think in terms of fabrication, which is the topic of insight. As you calm the fabrications down, that brings about more tranquility. The insight and tranquility go together, without your having to think about the words “tranquility” or “insight.”

Without getting involved in all the many discussions that revolve around those two terms, you just look at how you experience the breath in the present moment, and see it as a process of fabrication. As you get more sensitive to what you’re doing, you begin to see simply that the perception of breath fabricates the way you experience things, fabricates the feelings of pleasure or not-pleasure, ease or dis-ease that come up.

So you’re learning to look at your experience of the present moment not simply as a given, but as

something that you're participating in. And you have the power to participate in a more skillful way, a way that gives rise to a greater sense of ease, lightness, fullness, without your having to read the restaurant reviews and try to make it lighter with an air compressor, or make it full by stuffing in food. Your sense of the body just grows that way as you get more sensitive to how the breath feels and how you can calm down the impact of the breath on the body.

This way, you learn to see the power of your perception by holding on to that perception of breath—that it really does change the way you experience things. This is an important insight in and of itself. In the very beginning, it seems very unlikely: How could holding on to this one perception have that much of an impact? We've all had perceptions in the past, they come and they go, but if you really hold onto one, and are convinced it will make a difference, you find ultimately that it does.

But even when you think about it in terms of everyday experience, you'll see that your perceptions really do have an impact on what you see. Suppose you saw a picture in the newspaper of a woman, say, in her 60s, looking very disgruntled, and suppose the caption under it said, "the victim of a bank scam." You look at her expression of being disgruntled and you sympathize with her. But if the caption said, "This was the mastermind behind the bank scam," you'd have a very different feeling about her, simply based on the perception.

Well, the same principle applies to your body, applies to the present moment: The perception you hold in mind will have a huge impact on how you experience things. So trust in the fact that holding on to this perception of "breath, breath, breath" as you breathe in, as you breathe out, "whole-body breath" as you breathe in, as you breathe out, "calming the breath" as you breathe in, breathe out, can take you to a sense of ease, a sense of well-being, a feeling in which you can really settle down in the present moment and be very clear and alert about it. It really can make a change in what you're experiencing.

That's a very important lesson right there: that what you choose to focus on and how consistently you hang onto that focus can have a huge impact on what you're experiencing. Then you learn how to take this lesson and apply it to other aspects of life: When you're sick, when you're bored, when you're anxious, whatever the situation outside, you realize, "I may not be able to change the situation outside, but I *can* change my perception so that I don't have to suffer so much. And when I'm not adding any excess suffering, this makes things lighter for other people as well."

So there are a lot of lessons to learn here, just in those simple instructions, the Buddha's basic recipe for how to get the mind to settle down with clarity and a sense of well-being.

Try not to clutter up your mind with a lot of restaurant reviews. Sometimes you read them and they sound impossible. Can any mere mortal like us attain those states? Well, we can. But it's not by reading the descriptions and trying to create a recipe out of the descriptions. The recipe is in the basic breath meditation instructions. Again, it's like fixing a soufflé. You mix the ingredients together and you ask yourself, "How could this ever become light and airy?" Well, it can, if you do it right. And it is possible to attain strong states of concentration and to feel at home in them. But make sure that you're selective in which instructions you keep in mind, and which descriptions to leave for another time. This is one of the paradoxes of the Buddha's teachings. He says that the teachings are timeless. And

they are. But at the same time, different teachings are useful for different types of situations. So make sure that you're focusing on the right teaching that's right for here, right here, right now, and the results will have to come.