

## *Breathing Easy*

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One of the first things you discover when you meditate is that you can set up intention to stay with the breath and it can very quickly disappear and be replaced by another intention, even though you were sincere in the first intention. It's almost as if you have many minds. Strictly speaking, there's just one mind in any one person, but there are lots of views, lots of desires, and they're not all neatly organized. They often work at cross purposes. So it's useful to think of these desires as a committee, and a very disorganized committee at that. No interest in Robert's rules of order, no interest in fair discussion. It's like politics.

When you're meditating, you try to impose some order on the discussion, so that your intention to do what's skillful, your intention to stay, say, with the breath right now, can be maintained so that it's not just right now, but it's carried all throughout the hour. And you've got everyone on board.

The first thing you've got to understand is that every desire in the mind aims at happiness. That's what they all have in common, and that can become their basis for discussion, their basis for negotiation. The differences center around what's the best way to go about happiness, and what kind of happiness you want. Some desires go for the immediate hit, the immediate pleasure. Others see things more long-term and want something more lasting.

Fortunately, the path that the Buddha teaches offers a little something to both, and a lot to the second one, the desire for a long-term happiness. As the Buddha said, the beginning of wisdom is when you ask someone who knows: What when I do will be for my long-term welfare and happiness? The wisdom here is twofold: one, realizing that happiness has to come from your actions—it's not going to just come floating by—and two, you want long-term happiness. Short-term happiness is something anyone can find. Even common animals can find that kind of happiness. But long-term is more valuable. So the Buddha offers the path to long-term welfare happiness. As you follow this path, that's where you'll take yourself.

Notice he has you respect your desire for true happiness. He doesn't say that you have to sacrifice your happiness or deny yourself happiness or feel that it's a selfish thing to want true happiness. He tells you to respect that desire. But he also recognizes that the mind has its other desires for immediate happiness right now. So he teaches you to start appreciating what kind of immediate happiness you get from being on the path. And part of that lies in your ability to just breathe easy.

Now, as he said, breathing easy requires knowing that your actions are not harming anyone. This is why we have the principles of the precepts—or in terms of the path factors, we've got right action, right speech, and right livelihood. The way you act, the way you talk, the way you provide for your living, is something you try to keep as harmless as possible.

That way, when you think about the way you've been living, you're not overcome with fear or regret or denial about the harm you're causing, because you're not causing any harm. That allows you to breathe easy, the Buddha says. It's a kind of pleasure we tend to overlook, but it's very important. The more sensitive you get to that kind of pleasure, the easier it is to find pleasure right now.

Of course, another way of breathing easy is what we're doing right now, breathing easy as we focus on the breath. He says once you're aware of the way the long breath feels the body, the short breath feels in the body, and you've become aware of the whole body as you breathe in, the whole body as you breathe out, the next step is to calm bodily fabrication.

Or to put it in simple English, learn how to breathe easy throughout the body, and allow that sense of easy breathing, free-flowing breath energy to seep throughout the whole body: down your arms, out your fingers, down your back, out your legs, out your feet, your toes, all throughout your torso. Try to be as unrestricted as possible in allowing this breath energy to flow. Try to notice the areas where you hold it in, force it, or squeeze it. Then send out the order to all the stations in the body: Let the breath energy flow wherever you find it, so you can get an immediate sense of pleasure that's very visceral, fills the whole body. It's not sensual pleasure. It's *in* the body. The Buddha calls it the pleasure of form, the pleasure that comes from inhabiting your inner sense of the form of the body.

It's like that old *Peanuts* cartoon where Linus comes up to Lucy and says, "Feel how cold my hands feel." She says, "Oh yeah, they are cold. But how do you know how cold they are when you're inside them?" It's one thing to touch your hands from the outside. It's another thing to feel the hand from the inside. Touching from the outside is actually a sensory contact; feeling it from inside is form. And when you can stay with the sense of form, you've actually lifted the level of your mind.

The more you can gain a sense of pleasure here, the greater ease you feel right here, then the easier it is to fend off other thoughts that come into the mind and insist that you have to think about them. To the thoughts that insist on going for immediate pleasure, you can say, "No, I've got pleasure right here."

Then there are the thoughts that carry a sense of obligation. "You've got to think about me right now," they seem to say. This is where simply breathing easy is

not enough. You have to have a sense of values as well, that the mind does not have to burden itself with punitive thinking or its old false sense of obligation. You realize that the thought may come in, but that's old karma. You have the choice now in the present moment: Do you really have to engage in that old karma?

As I said earlier, when you think of letting go, it's not as if your mind has a hand that's holding on to things. It's simply that mind keeps acting in old habitual patterns, over and over and over again. A thought comes in, and you feel somehow obligated to deal with it. Or if it's persistent, you say, "Well, if it's really persistent, I guess I've got to go with it." But you don't. You've got the right to choose, every time it comes up, to say No. That doesn't mean it's not going to come up again, but right now you say, "No. I don't need to go there. I need to develop a sense of well-being. I need to develop more skillful qualities right now." And if you find that it's persistent, you can either decide to focus on the drawbacks of thinking about it or else tell yourself, "I can let it come, but I'm not going to go with it." This is where it's useful to think about the mind as a committee.

You've got the breath right here, so you can focus on the breath. Even though there's a thought lurking around in the mind someplace, even if it's shouting at you, you can stay right here. I was once teaching meditation at Swarthmore College. They give us this room that had an extremely loud clock—you know, one of those old clocks that ticks very loudly with every second. At the end of the first session, all the students opened their eyes and the first thing they said was, "That clock!" I had to remind them that the clock was there, but the breath was there as well. The clock didn't destroy the breath. It just made it much more important that you be really careful to stay focused on the breath.

In other areas of life, we learn how to stay focused on something even though there are other things that seem to be clamoring for our attention. I remember when I was young, I'd be reading a book, and my mother would come in, and she wanted to talk, but I wanted to read my book. So I learned how to read the book and kind of listen to the tone of her voice to know when to say, *mmm*, *mbm*, and yet stay focused on what I was reading.

We all have different pleasures that we know how to stay focused on regardless of possible or potential distractions. Well, you've got to learn how to develop that same habit around the breath. Even though you may be talking to someone, you can still be with the breath. Your mind may be talking at you, it may be shouting at you, but you can still stay with the breath.

One of the effective ways of dealing with these thoughts is to try to notice: Where in the breath energy in the body do you feel any blockage or constriction

that goes along with the thought? Where does it feel to be weighing you down? Once you notice it, think of the breath going right there and exploding that tension. Ajaan Fuang used to use that word a lot, *explode* the breath throughout the body. You can zap your thoughts in this way. Keep that sense of ease and well-being as full in the body as possible.

This, of course, might become threatening to another part of the mind that wants to be in control, that doesn't trust the sense of pleasure filling the body or feels threatened by the sense of pleasure in the body. But again, you've got to regard it simply as one more member of the committee. The thought may be there, but you don't have to believe it. The part of the mind that says, "This is threatening," or "This is boring," or "This is whatever": Learn to see that simply as another member of the committee. It may be one that you tend to identify with, but you can ask yourself "Why do I have to identify with it? After all, what am I here for?"

You read the texts, like the one we chanted just now: "rapture and pleasure born of seclusion," "rapture and pleasure born of concentration." These are the things we're after. At least, part of us wants that sense of rapture and pleasure. Of course there's another part that, once the rapture and pleasure actually come, feels threatened. So learn to step back and just watch it, as you stay with the breath. Recognize it simply as one more thought formation that you don't have to believe, you don't have to give in to. As long as you're grounded in the body, as long as you have a good healthy sense of breath energy filling the body, your mind is actually in a much healthier position than it is when it has its imaginary sense of control. You've actually got a good foundation here.

Then get back to breathing easy. Try to breathe with a sense of relief, a sense of burdens put down, a sense of freedom.

That way, you can begin to satisfy some of that desire for immediate pleasure and an immediate sense of well-being. This kind of pleasure, this kind of well-being, is a lot healthier than the other immediate pleasures we tend to go for. It doesn't cost anything, doesn't harm anyone, doesn't create any sense of intoxication. And even if you're addicted to it, it's a good addiction.

Sometimes you hear about the dangers of concentration—people getting stuck on the pleasure—and it can happen. People get that sense of pleasure and they want to run away from the world. But that kind of addiction can be dealt with, and it's a lot less harmful than the addiction that comes from demanding beautiful sights, beautiful sounds, wonderful tastes, aromas, tactile sensations. That kind of sensual pleasure, that kind of sensual demand, is what creates so

much turmoil in the world. Think of all the precepts that are broken because of sensual desire. Think of all the conflict.

The Buddha goes through a long list of the miseries that come from our attachment to sensual desires, starting with the fact we have to work to make a living and we suffer in the work, and we either find that the work doesn't succeed, or we're put to trouble when it *does* succeed. When we get rich, we've got to look after our riches, and the riches slip through our fingers. Or we get into battles within the family, within the society, between societies, all from our attachment to sensual pleasures.

Our attachment to firm concentration, however, doesn't carry those dangers. The one danger is that you get stuck on it and you don't want to go on to awakening. You have a sense that this is good enough right here. As I said, that kind of attachment is a lot less harmful and can be much more easily overcome.

So if you find yourself shrinking back from concentration, think of the dangers you're in for if you *don't* have this concentration to depend on. And if you find other thoughts getting in the way of the concentration, remind yourself, you've got the breath right here. It's not destroyed by any thought that comes in the mind. So you want to be able to keep tabs on the breath regardless of what other things are going on.

If you wait for the whole world to be quiet, if you wait for the whole mind to be quiet before you can settle in, it's never going to happen. The beginning of concentration comes when you focus on one thing within the range of your awareness and very consciously say No to the other things. You're not going to go there. Then as that one thing becomes more and more comfortable, more and more refreshing, you think of it spreading out to fill the rest of your awareness, first your physical awareness, then into the mind, so that the sense of body and mind become one.

That's how you develop the singleness of mind that's a feature of right concentration. You can't wait until the world is perfect to begin training your mind. If you did you, it would never happen. So you start with your own little spot. It's like lighting a fire in the wind. You've got the kindling. You've got the wood all there. You light this one little flame, and for a while it's very, very tiny, and the wind is very, very strong. So you've got to protect it. Cup it with your hands. Tend to it. Be very patient. Then gradually it'll grow and grow and grow, until finally you don't need to cup your hands around it any more. It burns the entire pile of wood, the entire pile of kindling.

In the beginning, though, you have to be very careful. You remove your hands, and the fire goes out. So protect that sense of well-being in the breath—the part of

the body where you feel you can breathe easy—because that's how right concentration begins.