

## *Levels of Truth*

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Close your eyes, focus on the breath, notice where you feel the breathing. You might start off with a couple of good, long, deep, in-and-out breaths to emphasize where in the body you sense the breathing process. And then ask yourself: Is it comfortable? If it feels too long, too heavy, too whatever, you can change. Adjust it a bit to see if shorter breathing might feel good, or gentler breathing might feel better, or heavier breathing, even deeper, or more shallow—lots of different ways you can adjust your breathing. Or you can just pose the question in the mind: “What kind of breathing would feel good right now?” each time you breathe in, each time you breathe out, and see how the body responds.

Think of the breath as a whole-body process. It’s not just air coming in and out of the lungs. It’s the movement of energy throughout the body, throughout the nerves, throughout the blood vessels, with up to three levels of the breath. One is the in-and-out breath, the air coming in and out of the lungs. Then there’s the subtler breath, the flow of energy that starts as soon as you breathe in and has already gone all the way through the body, through the blood vessels, moving through the nerves. And you might want to check, to make a survey of the body, to make sure that all those channels are open, down the back, out the legs, in the front of the body, right down the middle, past the shoulders, down the arms, all around the head, down the legs, all the way to the feet. Any patterns of tension or tightness, allow them to relax so that the energy can flow easily.

And there’s another level of breath energy, the still breath. It’s an energy, but it’s not moving. Ajaan Lee talks about being able to access it right at the spot where the diaphragm meets the front of the rib cage. But there are lots of other spots in the body, too, where you may notice that things are very still. If you want, you can focus on those still points, and then think of that stillness spreading throughout all of the breath channels in the body. But for that to work, you first have to go through the second level of breathing, where you’re working through the patterns of tension, combing them out, separating them out, loosening them up, so that when you focus on the stillness, everything is open. When you think about spreading it, all the channels are open and everything will go all the way out to the edge of the body.

If you can maintain that sense of stillness, fine. It’s like tuning-in to different radio stations. All those different frequencies are going through the air right now, it’s simply a matter of where you tune the radio, which level you’re going to focus

on. The blatant breath is right here, the subtler breath is right here, and the still breath is right here. They're all right here. It's simply a matter of focusing the level of your awareness, focusing the level of your sensitivity, so you can pick up on whichever level is appropriate. If the subtler ones are harder to focus on, stay with the blatant breath. But if you can manage the subtler ones, it's a good part of your repertoire.

See which ones you can stay with most consistently that allow the mind to have a sense of real stability and clear focus. If some of the subtle levels are too vague for you, you'll lose your focus, and you find the mind drifting off, so choose a level of breath energy that's appropriate for you right now. As for the other levels, you can leave them for later.

This is a common pattern throughout the Buddha's teachings. When he talks about right view, there are many levels of right view. They're all true—and they're all consistent with one another. The Buddha never taught convenient fictions. His levels of right view are there for you to choose as to which is appropriate to you for the task you face. It's like the truths of the different sciences: There are the truths of physics, and the truths of geology, and the truths of biology, and they're operating on different levels. There is a connection, but the question is: Which do you need right now for whatever particular purpose you have? And it's the same with the levels of right view.

There's the level of what's called mundane right view, in which you basically accept the principle of action, that your actions have consequences, not only in this life, but on into other lives. And those consequences are determined by the quality of mind you bring to the action, the quality of your intention. This level of right view is good for when you want to learn about what's skillful and what's unskillful in your day-to-day actions—and even what's skillful and unskillful in learning to get the mind to settle down. After all, meditation is a kind of kamma, a kind of action, so you want to do it skillfully. It's on this level that Buddha talks about beings, worlds, and most of our common everyday concepts. And it's a very useful level to have on hand.

But he also has other levels of right view. There's the level of the four noble truths, where he doesn't talk about beings or worlds. He simply analyzes the problem of suffering. This is for use when your powers of concentration get better and you can start analyzing things simply in terms of stress, the mental movements that are causing the stress, and what to do so you can see those mental movements and see the stress, and learn how to put an end to the stress by putting an end to the cause or the causes.

The Buddha divides things up into four categories like this because there are different duties for each category. Stress is something that you want to comprehend. You want to be able to look at it, and watch it so you can understand how it comes, how it goes, what are the things that you like that involve stress, what are the drawbacks of liking those things? The Buddha talks about common, everyday stress, and then he moves on to an underlying analysis that he calls the five clinging-aggregates: form, feeling, perception, fabrications, consciousness. All these things are things that we cling to, and in the clinging there's going to be stress. That's something you want to comprehend, you want to watch as it's actually happening to understand *how* it's happening.

And then in the course of performing that duty, you learn to see the cause of stress: what's arising together with the stress. The duty there is to abandon it once you see that this particular mental action, this type of perception, this type of attitude, this particular kind of desire, is bringing stress with it. You learn how to drop it. Again, you first have to see why you like it to begin with. But then also balance it out with its drawbacks, so that you can develop a sense of dispassion.

Now the dispassion there is actually the third noble truth. The duty there is to realize it, to see it clearly, to witness it as it's happening.

And the fourth noble truth is the path. The duty here is to develop it, all the qualities you need in terms of virtue, concentration, discernment. You don't just watch these things arise and pass away. You actively try to give rise to them, to maintain them, and to develop them. So these four truths are another level of truth. As the Buddha said, these are not other than what they seem. Now, we may misread them for a while, but when we actually see them happening, we'll see that stress really is stress, the cause really is the cause, and so on down the line.

Then there's a third level of right view. Ajaan Mun calls it the level where all four truths become one. The Buddha doesn't give it a particular name, he just calls it the right view of seeing everything arising and passing away simply as stress arising, stress passing away. In this case, the four categories are reduced to one. That's because at that point the path has been developed and you only have one duty left, which is to comprehend everything to the point of dispassion. That's putting the duty of comprehension and the dispassion and the abandoning all together into one, because at this point you've developed the path all the way. There's no more developing that has to be done. This, too, is a level of right view, and this, too, is a truth appropriate at a very refined level of the practice.

And then there's the truth of nibbana, which is something beyond the four truths, beyond even that one truth of stress arising, stress passing away—though in nibbana itself there are no right views. As Ajaan Lee says, nibbana has no use

for right views or wrong views, it doesn't need them at that point. It's the goal, it's not the path.

So the Buddha offers us as many levels of right view as they are appropriate for what we need to do. It's as if you're digging a well. You wouldn't go to an astrophysicist. The astrophysicists could tell you all kinds of truths about things, but that's not what you want for the sake of the well. You'd want a geologist who could tell you where to look for water. And even if the truth of astrophysics or the truth of physics would be applicable as to why there is water there—from comets or whatever—that's not the level of analysis you need right now. You're looking for water, you want to dig a well, so you go to the geologists. And it's the same with these levels of truths: Whatever duty is appropriate for what you need to do right now, that's the level of right view you want to focus on.

The Buddha didn't have any secret truths. As he said toward the end of his life, he was not a close-fisted teacher. He wasn't going to keep anything for the very end and didn't have secret teachings just for the inner circle. But there are levels to his teachings. They're all out there and available, and it's up to you to decide which is appropriate for you right now.

It's the same when you're focusing on the breath. The levels of the breath are all there, but which level of breath is it easiest for you to stay focused on? Stay with that level. As your powers of concentration and mindfulness get stronger, then you can start working with the subtler levels. They're all true. But the question is, which one is good for you right now? I.e., which one is beneficial and timely? This principle that the Buddha applied for right speech—that it be true, beneficial, and timely—applies to a lot of the other aspects of practices as well.

So focus on which ever level is best for you and allow it to develop. This is how we take on the Buddha's teachings—which are always available, you can look up any of his teachings at any time: You have to learn how to make them timely for yourself by focusing on the teaching that's most appropriate for you right now. That right there requires some discernment. But it's an exercise in discernment, that's how your discernment grows.