

Sensitive to the Breath

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When you focus on the breath, you want to be friends with the breath, which means that you have to be friendly *to* the breath. The breath just sits there, comes in and goes out, and pretty much responds to your activities, the activities of the mind. And there is a part of the body that tends to be shy: feelings in certain parts of the body that are going to take a while to open up to you, or maybe a spot in the body where the breath energy seems totally sealed off, which may be because you manhandled that spot in the past, so it quite trust you. It's as if there's another person in there.

So to be friends with the breath, you approach it by being very observant. Think of how you make friends with a person. You say a few things and see the response; you say a few others things and see the response; you do a few things together, get a sense of the other person. With friendships with human beings, we have the choice to say after a while that maybe this isn't the sort of person you want to be friends with. But with your breath, you'd better be friends. It's what keeps you alive; it's one of the last things you'll be aware of when you go. And so you want to be on good terms with it all the way.

It's interesting to know that in Ajaan Lee's descriptions you work with finding a spot in the body where the breath seems comfortable, and then you spread your awareness from that spot and let the breath spread from there. At other times in his instructions he has you work first with the breath in different parts of the body, section by section, and finally let them meld together. But the general pattern is that you start small and you move large.

The Buddha's approach was just the opposite. You get aware of the breath—notice when it's long, notice when it's short—and the very next step is to be aware of the whole body. From there, you work with the breath. As he says, you calm bodily fabrication, which means that you calm the effect the breath has on the body. But before you can calm it, you have to give yourself a sense of energy, what he calls rapture, which can also be translated as refreshment: the sense that the breath energy is filling, that it saturates the body. And it feels good. It feels like you've had a good charge of energy food, and you're perfectly content to stay right there. As you get deeper into concentration, this sense of rapture or refreshment

will grow stronger. In the beginning it may be very light. But in every case there's a sense that you don't really feel the need to go anywhere else. That's what you're looking for.

As I said, in some cases, as Ajaan Lee recommends that you start small and work large; or you might try the Buddha's way, and do it the other way around. Try to be aware of your whole body and then notice what happens when you're aware of the whole body, how your sense of the breath changes. This can be especially useful if you have a tendency to push things around inside. Lots of people complain that they can't find any comfortable breath anywhere in the body. But there must be someplace where it's comfortable. Otherwise you'd be dead.

But there is a problem when you tend to push the breath too much, force it too much, pinch off the end of the breath, squeeze it out, force it in. What we sometimes do is to create a little tension at the end of the in-breath or the out-breath to mark it. This is especially a tendency when you're beginning to meditate. You want to be clear that now the breath is coming in, now it's stopped, now it's going out. Well, it doesn't have that clear a marker. It's like the tide. There's no clear marker between the ebb and flow. With the breath, energy flows in, there's kind of a stillness, and then it flows out, and there's another stillness. And the question is how long an in-breath feels good, and when it stops feeling good. As soon as it stops feeling good, you don't squeeze it; you just allow it to stop. And it'll eventually go out on its own. Again, you don't have to speed the process up, to make it clearer or to make it more precise.

Breath as energy doesn't have very clear boundaries. And it can really penetrate anywhere. If you find that in trying to manipulate the breath there's a sense of pressure, you're actually working with what the Buddha calls the water element or the liquid element. In other words, the blood in the body is being pushed up against something solid inside that's not going to move, and the pressure builds up.

If you've been doing that, think of the pressure going the other direction. Or think of the barrier where the pressure's building up dissolving away. If there's a sense of the energy coming up in the head and getting stuck there, try to think of all the channels in the neck being open. You may find that you have a subconscious tendency to pull energy up in the neck as you breathe in. So you have to paint a picture in the mind that says No, it's going to down. Now, you don't force it down, you just allow it down, permit it to go down. Open your

mind to the possibility that it *can* go down. Wherever there's any tension in the neck, think of it relaxing. That might be what's blocking off the ability for the energy to flow down. And then don't do anything more than that.

This way, when you treat the breath gently and you treat it from an all-around perspective, it begins to settle down. You're not there squeezing it or forcing it. You're actually putting most of your effort in maintaining this full-body awareness, which frees the breath to do what it can in the space of that full body.

As I said earlier, there may be spots in the body that don't seem to be responding. Maybe you have to be patient with them. They've been pushed around a lot in the past—especially the areas around the heart, the areas around the stomach. We're trained to squeeze the muscles in the past when we're nervous or upset; we're trained to bottle up an emotion. Well, there it is—it's all bottled up. We succeeded. But now it's a pain. Now it's something that's actually in the way. So you're trying to unbottle it, which means that you have to be very gentle around it. And very, very patient. If it doesn't respond right away, then just leave it for the time being. Work on the parts of the body that do respond. And as you get familiar with them and you're on friendly terms with them, other parts of the body will open up and be willing to be friendly, too.

Now, the Buddha talks about two kinds of friends that are worth keeping, worth looking for: what he calls admirable friends and loyal friends. The loyal friends are the ones who are there for you all the time. As the Buddha said, when you're heedless, they'll look after you; when you're sad, they'll try to cheer you up. They'll be sad with you and do what they can to cheer you up. Other kind of friends, what he calls admirable friends, are the ones who set good examples for you, the kinds of things you want to aspire to.

Now, with the breath, you got a potentially loyal friend; so you've got to be the admirable friend for the breath. Direct your mind as it relates to the breath so as not to be too impatient, to give the breath some time and to be very observant. Notice when you're trying to adjust the breath: Are you treating it too heavy-handed a way? Again, you're putting pressure on it or forcing it in a direction where it really doesn't want to go. Or—not to attribute a will to the breath—at the very least if it goes there, it's not going to be good. So back off. Give it some space. Take that full-body perspective. See how that changes your understanding of what's going on when you breathe in, when you breathe out.

So with the directions in breath meditation: If something is not working for you, well, flip it around. You can see this in the passages where Ajaan Lee talks

about getting the mind centered on the breath and then evaluating it. In other words, trying to develop what he calls singleness of preoccupation first, and then evaluate it. But sometimes he says to evaluate it first to arrive at singleness of preoccupation. There's no set order in which these things work. If working with the breath in the torso doesn't get good results, well, start with the extremities, start with the fingers and work up the arms, and then with the toes on up the legs. Learn to flip things around a little bit. If things aren't working, ask yourself what would be the opposite approach. And if you get results with the opposite approach, it still counts as breath meditation. Because even though the major principles are the same for everybody, the nuts and bolts of how things work out will vary from person to person, from session to session.

This is one of the ways you develop your discernment, by noticing, when something is not working, what you could do to change. And open your mind to larger possibilities of what you could possibly do to change things. This is how the Buddha gained awakening himself. There was nobody there to teach him. He had no meditation guides to consult. How did he learn? He looked at his actions. He said, "Okay, these actions are not giving me the results I want. What's another alternative?" He came up with another alternative. He tried that. And when that didn't work, he tried something else. But again, he kept referring everything back to his actions. He didn't blame somebody outside or some higher power outside or whatever. It was always: What am I doing? What can I change?

And even when you get instructions from someone else, you have to flip them around a little bit, because it's always possible that your understanding of the instructions is wrong or backwards for some reason or another. Or it doesn't quite mesh with what you're doing right now. So give it the benefit of the doubt. And in this case, benefitting with doubt means asking yourself: What if I tried it the other way around?

I went through a period once when I found it very difficult to breathe. At the end of the meditation, everything in the body seemed to be clamped down. Ajaan Fuang was far away. It was a month or so before I saw him. So I mentioned this to him when I finally met him. He said, "You're focused on the earth element; focus instead on space." That solved the problem right there.

So sometimes our problems are due to things we don't really know we're doing. I was holding the perception of earth someplace in my head, and that was getting imposed on the body. And thinking of the body as really solid, it seemed impossible to squeeze the breath into that lump of solidity. So you can think of

the space in the atoms or between the atoms. Or you can think that your experience of the body is primarily energy. You look at the body in the mirror and what you see is solid. You hit it against things and it's solid. But how you feel it from inside: That's energy.

So don't use your perception of "solid" to squeeze the energy around. Think of the energy as already there. It's the first thing you know. It's the closest thing to the mind itself. As Ajaan Lee always said, you want to be really good friends with things that are really close to you. You don't want to be like that character in *Bleak House* who was always worried about the children in Africa and was neglecting her own children. Your breath is the most immediate, the most intimate thing you experience in life. It's your direct experience of the body. And through the breath, you experience your senses. This means that breath is prior.

So be on really good terms with it. Because if you're on bad terms with the breath, then it skews your relationship with everything else. The problem is simply that the breath is so close to us that we often misperceive it. It's almost as if it's too close for us to focus on, or we haven't bothered to focus on it at all because we're interested in the things further away. So take a while to back up, back up, back up, and get into this immediate experience of the breath. Observe it and be on good terms with it, so it really can become your friend.