

All-around Knowing

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When the Buddha describes *jhana*, or right concentration, he makes a few observations, but leaves a lot of empty spaces. For instance, he says there's going to be a sense of pleasure, but he doesn't say much about how to create that sense of pleasure. He simply notes that when you get rid of the hindrances, there's a sense of ease. He compares the hindrances to being imprisoned, to being in debt, to going across a desolate landscape. So when you're past the hindrances, it's as if you escape from prison, you're out of debt, you've gotten past that desolate landscape.

But in terms of the physical sense of pleasure that comes with right concentration, he doesn't say much about how to produce it. He does say you learn how to breathe in and out sensitive to pleasure, but that's about it. So there's a lot to be filled in. He also says that when you have that sense of pleasure, you let it spread so that it permeates the entire body.

He gives an image of a bathman. Back in those days they didn't have soap. They would take a powder like flour that had soap mixed in with it, and then mix it with water, so that you'd have a dough that you would rub over your body. And to get that soap dough just right, the bathman would have to mix the powder with the water in such a way that every little last bit of the powder was moistened. The water had to be worked through the dough very thoroughly. That's all the Buddha explains.

Ajaan Lee adds a lot of detail to those explanations. When you work with the breath, he says you try to find what kind of rhythm feels good right now. There's not just short or long. There's also in-short and out-long, or in-long and out-short, fast, slow, heavy, light, deep, shallow. And he recommends that you play with those possibilities, experiment. When you gain a sense of ease from that, then think of it spreading. Here he gives the image of the different breath energies that you have in the body. You have the breath flowing down the spine, the breath coming in at the middle of the chest at the heart and then going down into the intestines, the breath going down the shoulders, the arms, and the legs. He compares this process to extending electric lines through the countryside, providing power and light.

So you have to think of the breath not as air, but as energy, and get used to thinking about the different kinds of energies that there may be in the body. This requires a lot of observation, because there are some sensations in the body that

are really related to the breath but not obviously. It takes a while to get used to them, to seeing them as breath. Otherwise, you think that in order to get the breath all the way down to the toes you have to breathe really long. But it turns out there are many levels of breath energy and some of the really subtle ones are very fast. As soon as the in-breath has started, the breath has gone all the way down. So to get sensitive to that, you first have to have the image in mind that it can happen.

Before you try working with the whole body, it's good to work with the body section by section. Ajaan Lee recommends that you start with the back of the neck, but some people find that starting with the abdomen works better because they're more sensitive to the rise and fall of the abdomen than they are to the breath energy in the back of the neck. So you start right around the navel and focus on that section of the abdomen as the whole area you're going to work with. Pay attention there and notice how the breathing feels there. If there's any tension or tightness in that part of the body, allow it to relax, because the tension is what blocks the breath energy.

When you work with that for a while and things seem to be okay, then you move up to the solar plexus. Follow the same steps there. Locate that part of your body in your awareness, watch it for a while to see what kind of breathing feels good there, and if there's any tension or tightness, allow it to relax. Think of it dissolving away so that no new tension builds up as you breathe in, and you're not holding onto any tension as you breathe out. And get used to visualizing the breath energy entering the body at the spot where you're focused. You're not having to pull it down, say, from the nose. As soon as you breathe in, there's energy there. That helps to change your perception of breath and get it more in line with a perception that will actually help comfortable breath energies to flow throughout the body, to saturate every cell, every nerve end. You need the right perception in order for this to work.

Then you move up to the middle of the chest, the base of the throat, the middle of the head. You can start thinking about energy coming in the back of the neck and then going down the shoulders and the arms; then coming in the back of the neck, going down the back, and out into the legs. Make sure at the beginning that the areas you're focused on are not too large, so there's no subconscious need to have a long breath to fill the whole area. Work with little areas first. As you get sensitive to these little areas, you begin to realize that, as soon as the breath starts, there's already energy right there. You don't have to pull it from anywhere else.

Then you can go through the body again, this time taking on larger areas. You combine the abdomen and the stomach, for instance, or the chest and the throat.

Each time you go through the body, make the areas larger until you're able to be with the whole body with a sense that as soon as you breathe in, every cell in the body has already started to get some breath energy. Nothing has to be pulled from anywhere else. All you have to do is think of opening and relaxing, opening and relaxing.

Any place where you feel that there's a line of tension building up, think of the breath as cutting through it. One of the *ajans* in Thailand liked to hold in mind the image of a knife in your hand. Any sense of connection anywhere in the body—it can be the breath, it can be your tendons, any thoughts connecting—think of the knife cutting right through.

As you do this, the range of your conscious awareness begins to spread. It's like the kind of awareness that hunters have as they go through the forest. Their attention is centered right in the middle of their body, and then it spreads out evenly in all directions because. After all, the animals they're hunting could be in any direction, the tracks they're looking for could be in any direction, so their attention has to be all around.

If you don't like the image of hunting animals, you can think of mushroom hunters. As they go through the forest, they can't be too narrowly focused because otherwise their focus might go right past a whole patch of mushrooms and they wouldn't see it.

So think of your center as being inside and your awareness spreading out evenly in all directions from this center in the middle, with the breath equally in all parts of the body. Then just try to maintain that sense of being centered, all-around, and equal, because that's the kind of awareness you're looking for. You need an awareness that's all-around. The reason the mind slips off to the past or the future is because it gets very small. It's as if the route to the past and the future is a little tube, and you usually make the mind small enough to fit down the tube. But here you've got the mind enlarged. It won't fit.

Another image is that when you're thinking about something, you have to narrow down your awareness of the body so that you can create your little thought world. But as long as you can maintain this full-body awareness, when it's really solid, there's no space for the thought worlds to appear, or if they do appear, there's no space for you to move into them, because you're consciously too big.

In Pali this is called *mahaggatan cittam*, the enlarged mind. When your mind is enlarged and all-around like this, then when you're hunting for your defilements, whenever they come into range, from any direction, you'll be able to sense them. Otherwise, if you're focusing on one little area, the defilements can be

chattering away in other parts of your mind, and if your focus is too narrow you won't see or hear them.

So you want this scattershot awareness. It's centered, so it's not scatter-brained, but it radiates in all directions. The breath is equal in all directions, the awareness is equal in all directions, they both fill the body, and there's a sense of ease that goes with them.

This is how you get the mind into right concentration. But even Ajaan Lee's method leaves its blank spaces that you're going to have to fill in. Just hold to the basic principle that you'll have to connect with your sense of the whole body as you feel it from within. Try to make use of his perceptions of breath energy going through the nerves, going through the blood vessels, and be conscious of the rhythm that you're using to breathe. And if you're really, really sensitive, you can fill in the blanks yourself.