

Inquisitive

June 30, 2020

The texts list breath meditation as a topic appropriate for everybody, but as Ajaan Fuang pointed out, that's not the case. To get the most out of it, you have to be observant, inquisitive, not taking things for granted.

Here it is, the breath is coming in going out, and then it comes in goes out again. If you're not very sensitive, you say, "Well, there's not much here. Let's move on to something else." You've got to sensitize yourself both to how the breath feels in the body and how the mind relates to the breath.

As Ajaan Lee points out, there are many levels of breath in the body. There's the in-and-out breath, there's the breath that runs through the nerves and saturates the whole body, and then there's the still breath. We tend to think of breath as being movement, but there is a still breath, and it's there all the time. You just have to tune your awareness into it. Now, as he points out, the breath that's most congenial, that gives the best results when you work with it, is the breath that goes through the nerves. You start with long breathing, short breathing, in long out short, in short out long, to see what rhythm of in-and-out breathing feels good.

But then you can spend a lot of time investigating how the breath energy flows through the body, and you find a lot of seemingly contradictory things. Sometimes it feels like it's coming in from outside, and other times it feels like it's flowing from certain spots inside the body. It starts, say, at the tip of the sternum or the point just above the navel, and the breath energy radiates from those spots. Other times, it feels like there's a column of energy running down the middle of the torso, and the breath comes in to and out from that column in all directions.

You wonder why it is that you can experience the breath energy in so many different ways. Well, look into that, because in some cases it's because the breath is already flowing that way and you just happened to run into it: This is how it feels today. In other cases, it has to do more with your perception. You change the perception, and the experience of the breath is going to change.

Now, if you're inquisitive, you'll want to look into that, too. How is it that just an image in the mind will change the energy flow in the body? And how can you make the best use of that?

After Ajaan Fuang passed away, I noticed that a lot of his students began to fall away from

the practice, while the ones who stuck with the practice were those who had ailments of one kind or another. They had discovered that by the way they breathed, they could ameliorate the symptoms of the different diseases they had. They began to realize that this is a necessary part of treating the body. Having the sense that this practice is necessary is what kept them with it. The pains in the body, the constraints of their illnesses forced them. But if you're wise, you don't have to be forced.

Think of the Buddha's image of the different kind of horses. There's the horse that all it has to do is hear the word "whip" and it'll do what you want it to do. There are other horses where you have to show them the whip, then they'll do what you want them to do. Others horses see the whip, they don't think much of it, but if you touch them with the whip, they'll obey. With other horses, you have to go into the flesh a little bit. With other horses, you have to go all the way to the bone. But why wait for the whip to go to the bone? Just knowing that there is a whip should be enough to make you want to obey.

In other words, you realize that if you're going to find a happiness in life that's really secure, you've got to know your mind. And here the breath is already teaching you something interesting about the mind: the power of perception. Just the image you hold in mind can change an experience. This applies, of course, not only to the breath but also to other things. That makes you stop and think: What would life be like if you had more control over your perceptions? And when you go back to the breath, what perceptions are most useful with the breath?

One that I've found useful is that when you breathe out, don't have the perception that you're forcing the air out. You participate a little bit in the pulling of the air in as you breathe in, but as for the air going out, you don't have to force it out. Don't squeeze it out, because when you squeeze the air out, you also tend to squeeze the energy in the nerves, which makes it impossible for a sense of fullness to develop.

So think of the nerves and all the blood vessels being full, full, full, all the way through the in-breath, all the way through the out-. If the out-breath starts getting so long that it begins to feel like there's a squeeze, okay, stop. You find that you start breathing in a rhythm that's long in, short out, long in, short out, and a greater and greater sense of fullness develops in the body.

That, in turn, will have an impact on the mind. There will be a sense of floating, and the mind's interest in thinking about issues of the world outside will get a lot less traction. It just feels so good being right here. If you haven't experienced that yet, know that it is possible.

Keep that possibility in mind. Someday you may stumble across it and say, “Oh yeah. This is what it’s like when they say you breathe in and out and there’s a sense of fullness.”

You begin to realize that perception has an impact on the way you experience things, but also that experiences will have an impact on the way the mind perceives things. It goes back and forth. Wherever you have a back-and-forth relationship like that, that’s something you have to look into more deeply. What’s going on here? Where does the original impulse come from?

So, here you are, investigating an old problem, what they call the *mind-body* problem. What is the relationship between the mind and the body? But you’re not asking the question in the abstract as most philosophers do, because when you get into the abstract the issues just get further and further away from the real issue, which is: How can you take that understanding of mind and body, and use it to put an end to suffering?

There’s the belief that the body is just a dead lump and then the mind is what invigorates it. But how can something that’s totally mental have an impact on a dead lump? There’s another theory, which is that they’re both kinds of energy. There are lots of theories, but what we want to do is explore: How does the mind relate to the body, how does the body relate to the mind? And how can you understand that relationship in a way that you can make the most use of it?

You see that the mind and the body meet at the breath. So as you get to know the relationship between the mind and the breath, that spreads out into the body. After all, if it weren’t for the breath, you wouldn’t be able to move the body. If it weren’t for the breath, you wouldn’t know what was going on in the body. There’s something about this medium that sends impulses in one direction and back in the other direction. How does it do that? And where in there does the mind create suffering? It’s all happening right here, and as long as you take an inquisitive attitude, you’ll find that it gets more fascinating being right here.

As Ajaan Fuang used to say, there are two kinds of people coming to meditation: those who think too much and those that don’t think enough. The ones who don’t think enough just want a rest and they can rest easily. The ones who think too much are the ones who can’t let themselves rest. They can’t stay with the breath. They’ve got to figure things out in the abstract first.

The proper way, though, is to learn how to think *through* the breath. In other words, get in touch with the experience of the breathing, and then take that as your object of inquiry: the *medium* of inquiry. Learn how to ask questions not in the abstract, but in the experience of

the breath. You'll find that it's a lot easier to stay here, and you'll get a lot more out of it.

We're not here just to rest in the breath—although we do need that—but once the mind is rested, you have to give it work to do. The work is right here in this process of fabrication that goes into the breathing, bodily fabrication. How does bodily fabrication relate to verbal fabrication? And how does that relate to mental fabrication? It's all happening right here, and you learn the answers to those questions not in the abstract but being right here, too: noticing connections right here, asking questions right here.

So be inquisitive. That's how you get the most out of being right here.

As the Buddha said, we can use concentration as a pleasant abiding—in other words, just a nice place to settle in—but we can also use it to develop mindfulness and alertness, and to figure out how the mind can free itself of greed, aversion, and delusion. The breath is going to teach you those last two things only if you ask questions. You've got to figure out what are the right ways to ask the questions, what are the right questions to ask—and what are the right ways of going about finding answers in the breath, in the mind's relationship to the breath. That's when the meditation gives its best results.