

## *The Steps of Breath Meditation*

*Thanissaro Bhikkhu*  
*November, 2002*

When the Buddha teaches breath meditation, he teaches sixteen steps in all. They're the most detailed meditation instructions in the Canon. And the breath is the topic he recommends most highly, most frequently—because the breath is not only a place where the mind can settle down and gain concentration, but it's also something the mind can analyze. It's where all the insights needed for Awakening can arise—while the mind is being mindful of the breath, alert to the breath, and also conscious of how it relates to the breath.

In the later stages of breath meditation the emphasis is focused less on the breath than on the mind as it relates to the breath. In the beginning stages, though, the emphasis is on the breath itself, on using the breath to snare the mind and bring it into the present moment. In the first two steps you're simply with long breathing and short breathing, sensitizing yourself to what long and short breathing feel like. Beginning with the third step, though, there's an element of volition. You train yourself, and the first thing you train yourself to do is to be aware of the whole body as you breathe in, aware of the whole body as you breathe out.

When the Buddha describes concentration states, he doesn't use images of single-pointedness. He uses images of whole-body awareness. When a sense of rapture and pleasure comes from the breath, he tells you to knead that sense of rapture and pleasure through the whole body, the way you would knead water into flour to make dough. Another image is of the rapture welling up from within the body and filling the body just like a spring of cool water coming up from within a lake, filling the entire lake with its coolness. Another image is of lotuses standing in a lake: Some of the lotuses don't go above the water but stay totally immersed in the water, saturated from their roots to their tips with the stillness and coolness of the water in the lake. Still another image is of a person wrapped in white cloth, totally surrounded by the white cloth from head to foot, so that all of his body is covered by the white cloth.

These are all images of whole-body awareness, of a sense of rapture, pleasure, or bright awareness filling the entire body. That's what you want to work on when you get to know the breath, because the type of awareness that allows insight to arise is not restricted to one point. When you're focused on one point and blot out everything else, that leaves a lot of blind spots in the mind. But when you try to get a more all-around awareness, it helps eliminate the blind

spots. In other words, you want to be immersed in the breath, aware of the breath all around you. One of the phrases they use for this—*kayagatasati*—is mindfulness immersed in the body. The body is saturated with awareness, and the awareness itself gets immersed in the body, is surrounded by the body. So it's not that you're up in one spot—say, in the back of the head—looking at the rest of the body from that one spot, or trying to block awareness of the rest of the body from that one spot of awareness. You've got to have a whole-body awareness, all-around, 360 degrees, so as to eliminate the blind spots in the mind.

Once you have this type of awareness, you work at maintaining it—although the “work” here is not like other work. You work at not moving your attention, at not letting it shrink. You work at not taking on other responsibilities. With time, though, the work becomes more natural, more second-nature. You feel more and more settled and at home. As the mind settles in, its usual nervous energy begins to dissolve. The body actually needs less and less oxygen, because the level of your brain activity begins to grow calm, and so the breath gets more and more refined. It can even grow perfectly still, for all the oxygen you need is coming in through the pores of your skin.

At this point the breath and your awareness seem to have melted into each other. It's hard to draw a line between the two and, for the time being, you don't try. Allow the awareness and the breath to interpenetrate, to become one.

You have to allow this awareness, this sense of oneness, to get really solid. Otherwise it's easily destroyed because the tendency of the mind is to shrink up. As soon as we think, we shrink up the energy field in certain parts of the body to block them out of our awareness, which is why there's tension in the body every time a thought occurs. This part of the body gets tense so you can think that thought; that part of the body gets tense so you can think this one, back and forth this way. It's no wonder that the simple process of thinking takes a lot out of the body. According to some Chinese medical treatises, a person whose work is mental tends to use up energy at three times the rate of a person whose work is totally physical. This is because thinking involves tension in the body. And, in particular, thoughts that go off into the past or into the future have to create whole worlds for themselves to inhabit.

When we're getting the mind concentrated, we're thinking in a different way. In the beginning stages we're still thinking, but we're thinking solely about the present moment, observing solely the present moment, being alert and mindful to what's going on here, so we don't have to create worlds of past and future. This imposes less stress on the body. In order to maintain that present focus and not go slipping off to your old habits, you've got to keep your awareness as broad as possible. That's what keeps you rooted in the present moment, all the way down to your fingers and toes. When your awareness stays broad, it

prevents the kind of shrinking up that allows the mind to slip out after thoughts of past and future. You stay fully inhabiting the present. The need to think gets more and more attenuated.

When fewer and fewer thoughts interfere with the flow of the breath energy, a sense of fullness develops throughout the body. The texts refer to this fullness as rapture, and the sense of ease accompanying it as pleasure. You let this sense of easy fullness suffuse the body, but you still maintain your focus on the breath energy, even if it's totally still. Eventually—and you don't have to rush this—the point will come when the body and mind have had enough of the rapture and ease, and you can allow them to subside. Or there may be times when the rapture gets too overpowering, in which case you try to refine your awareness of the breath so that it can come in under the radar of the rapture, and you move to a level of total ease. Then even the ease—the sense of imbibing the pleasure—subsides, leaving you with total stillness.

After you've become settled in the stillness, you can start looking for the dividing line between awareness and the breath. Up to this point you've been manipulating the breath, trying to get more and more sensitive to what feels comfortable in the breathing and what doesn't, so that your manipulation gets more and more subtle, to the point where you can drop the manipulation and just be with the breath. This allows the breath to grow more and more refined until it's absolutely still. When things are really solid, really still, your awareness and the object of your awareness naturally separate out, like chemicals in a suspension that's allowed to stay still. Once the awareness separates out, you can begin directly manipulating the factors of the mind, the feelings and perceptions that shape your awareness. You can watch them as they do this, for now the breath is out of the way.

It's like tuning-in to a radio station: As long as there's static, as long as you aren't precisely tuned-in to the station's frequency, you can't hear the subtleties of the signal. But once you're right at the frequency, the static goes away and all the subtleties become clear. When you're tuned-in to the mind, you can see the subtleties of feeling and perception as they move. You can see the results they give, the impact they have on your awareness, and after a while you get the sense that the more refined that impact, the better. So you allow them to calm down. When they're calmed down, you're left with awareness itself.

But even this awareness has its ups and downs, and to get you past them the Buddha has you manipulate them, just as you manipulated the breath and the mental factors of feeling and perception. The text talks about gladdening the mind, steadying the mind, and releasing the mind. In other words, as you get more and more used to the stages of concentration, you begin to gain a sense of which kind of concentration your awareness needs right now. If it seems

unstable, what can you do to steady it? How do you change your perception of the breath or adjust your focus to make the mind more solid? When the meditation starts getting dry, what can you do to gladden the mind? And as you're moving from one stage of concentration to the next, exactly what do you let go that releases the mind from the weaker stage of concentration and allows it to settle in a stronger one?

When the Buddha talks about releasing the mind at this point in the practice, he's not talking about ultimate release. He's talking about the kind of release that occurs as you let go, say, of the directed thought and evaluation of the first jhana, releasing yourself from the burden of those factors as you move into the second jhana, and so on through the different levels of concentration. As you do this, you begin to see how much those levels of concentration are willed. This is important. Insight can come while you're in concentration as you move from one stage to the next, as you notice out of the corner of your mind's eye what you do to move from one way of experiencing the breath to the next, one level of solidity to the next. And you see how much this is a produced phenomenon.

This finally leads to the stages of breath meditation associated with insight. First there's insight into inconstancy, both in the breath, but more importantly in the mind, as you see that even these stable, very refreshing levels of concentration are willed. Underlying all the refreshment, all the stability, is a repeated willing, willing, willing to keep the state of concentration going. There's an element of burdensomeness there. Insight into inconstancy or impermanence has less to do with how you consume experiences than it does with how you produce them. You see all the effort that goes into producing a particular type of experience, and the question becomes, "Is it worth it? Isn't this burdensome, having to keep making, making, making these experiences all the time?"

Then the problem becomes, "What are you going to do to let go of this burden?" If you don't fabricate these states of concentration, is your only choice to go back to fabricating other kinds of experiences? Or is it possible not to fabricate any experience at all? All of our normal experiences from moment to moment to moment, whether in concentration or out, have an element of intention, an element of will. And now you've come to the point where that element of will, that element of intention, begins to stand out as an obvious burden. Particularly when you look around to ask, "Who am I producing this for? Exactly who is consuming this?" You come to see that your sense of who you are, who this consumer is, is difficult to pin down, because it's all made out of the aggregates, and the aggregates themselves are inconstant, stressful, and not-self. This consumer is something produced as well. This gives rise to a quality the texts call *nibbida*, which can be translated as disenchantment or disillusionment. Sometimes the translation gets stronger: revulsion. In all cases

it's a sense that you've had enough of this. You feel trapped by this process. You no longer find any satisfaction here. You want to find a way out.

So you focus on letting go. According to the texts, first there's a focus on dispassion, then a focus on cessation, then finally a focus on total relinquishment. In other words, in the final stage you let go of every kind of doing, every kind of volition, of the producer, of the consumer, of the observer, even of the perceptions and the thought-fabrications that make up the path. When the path-factors have done their job you can let them go as well.

All of this takes place right at the breath, at the point where the mind and the body meet at the breath. This is why the Buddha never has you totally drop the breath as your theme of meditation. Progress along the path comes simply from staying right here and growing more and more aware of what's going on all around right here. You develop a more all-around awareness, not only all-around in the body, but also all-around in the mind. You see through the blind spots that allowed you to consume experiences obliviously, forgetting the fact that you had to produce them. It's like watching a movie—two hours of lights flashing up on a screen—and then later seeing a documentary about how they made the movie. You realize that months, sometimes years of labor went into it, and the question becomes, "Was it worth it?" A few brief hours of empty enjoyment and then you forget about it—despite all the work, all the suffering that went into making it.

So when you look at all your experiences in the same way, seeing all the effort that goes into their production and asking if it's worth it: That's when you really get disillusioned, disenchanted, when you can really let go. You let go not only of perceptions or feelings as they come and go, but also of the act of creating these things. You see that this act of creating is all-pervasive, covers all your experiences. You're always creating, either skillfully or unskillfully. There is constant production every time there's an intention, every time there's a choice in the mind. This is what begins to seem oppressive; this is what finally impels you to let go.

You let go of the producing, you let go of the creation, and the letting-go really opens things up. The mind opens to another dimension entirely: one that's not made up, that's not created, where there's no arising or passing away. And that too is touched right here, although at that moment there's no sense of breath, no sense of the body, no sense of the mind as a functioning, creating consumer or producer. When the Buddha talks about it, all his words are analogies, and all the analogies are of freedom. That's about all that can be said when you try to describe it, but there's a lot that can be said about how to get there. That's why the Buddha's teachings are so extensive. He goes into a lot of detail on how to get there, outlining all of the steps. But if you want to know what the goal is like,

don't go looking for extensive descriptions. Just follow the steps and you'll know for yourself right here.