

The Four Jhanas

January 30, 2009

As you sit here with your eyes closed, where do you feel the breathing? You may feel it in lots of places in the body, because the breath isn't just the air coming in and out of the lungs. It's an energy flow. It's part of the breath element that fills the entire body. Your sense of the body sitting here, the whole body from the head down to the feet, has a breath aspect. Part of that breath is the in-and-out breath, and another part is simply the energy flowing in the nerves, in the blood vessels, out to the pores of the skin. It's all breath.

So as you breathe in and out, you have the right to sense it anywhere at all. You can focus either on the spot where the breath seems most prominent, or on the spot where it simply seems most natural to focus. Some people find it easiest to focus on the head, others find it easier to focus on the chest, the neck, or the shoulders. So focus anywhere you'd like.

And allow the spot where you're focusing to have a certain amount of freedom. In other words, don't clamp down on it. Sometimes you may try to define things sharply: "This is where the in-breath begins, this is where the out-breath begins; this is where the in-breath ends, this is where the out-breath ends." But doing that places unnecessary restrictions on your breathing. Given that the whole body is a body of breath energy, breath energy doesn't come with clear lines or sharp demarcations. When you breathe in, the incoming energy simply melds with the old energy. It doesn't fight it, doesn't have to be pushed against anything. It just suffuses and energizes what's already there. There's no clear line of demarcation. When the in-breath reaches a point where you feel you've had enough incoming energy, the breath goes out.

So try not to impose too many strict, preconceived notions on the breath. Just watch how the process feels and hold that perception in mind: that the whole body is a field of breath energy and the in-breath is simply charging up the breath energy already there. Then when things feel too charged, you allow the breath to go out. When it's going to start coming in again, that's its business. You're just there to watch it. To use the Thai word Ajaan Fuang would use, "*prakhawng*"—hover around it, look after it, make sure it feels good. You can pose some questions in the mind: "What kind of breathing would feel better right now? What kind of breathing would feel best? Which part of the body needs more breath energy?" And see how the body responds. Just hover around the breath like this.

The hovering around: That's directed thought and evaluation. As long as your hovering can stay with the breath and doesn't hover off to other places, you've got the third factor for first jhana, which is singleness of preoccupation: the singleness here meaning both that it's the one topic you're interested in and that, as you work with it, it becomes more and more the one thing filling the whole body, your whole range of awareness. You're working on a very broad-based state of concentration here. As the Buddha says, when a feeling of ease and rapture arises, you try to spread it throughout the whole body.

The image he gives is of a bathman or a bathman's apprentice kneading water into a pile of bath powder. In those days they didn't have soap. The bathman would start with some scented bath powder and then mix it with water, kneading the water into the powder until it formed a paste with which they'd bathe. It's similar to mixing water with flour to make bread dough: You want to mix it just right and knead it through thoroughly so that all the flour gets moistened in the same way. You don't add so much water that the water begins to dribble out, or so little that not all the flour gets moistened. That's what directed thought and evaluation are for. They're not extraneous to the first jhana. They're part of the process of arranging a good place for the mind to settle down. They help attain, someplace in the body, a balanced feeling of ease and refreshment, and then allow that ease and refreshment to fill the body, to knead it through the body if necessary, so that the whole body feels saturated and filled: with ease and refreshment, with breath, with awareness.

You'll notice that awareness has two aspects. There's focused awareness and then there's a kind of background awareness already in your body. You want to get them in touch with each other. The background awareness is already there, just like the background breath energy in the body. The question in both cases, though, is: Is it full? When dealing with the breath, you're not trying to pump breath into areas where it's never been before. You're simply allowing everything to connect. And the same with your awareness: You want your focused awareness to connect with your background awareness so that they form a solid whole.

Now as you work with this, you may find after a while that everything is as saturated as it can get. No matter how much you try to make it more comfortable, it just doesn't seem to change. At that point you can just settle in with the breathing as it is, keeping your awareness centered and full. You gain a sense more and more that the breath and the awareness become one—because, after all, they're filling the same place. The awareness fills the body; the breath fills the body; each fills the other, and they become one.

The stronger the sense of oneness, the further and further away the hindrances go. They may nibble at the edges of your awareness here and there, but you really don't have to pay them any attention. You don't have to chase them away. If you chase them away, you drop the breath and they've got you. So you don't want them to trick you in that way. Whatever thought comes passing by, just let it go passing by. But the greater the sense of unity or unification here, the less the hindrances are going to be a problem. That right there is enough to get you solidly based.

From there the concentration can develop further. You may decide that the sense of rapture and refreshment is too coarse, that it actually becomes an irritant. You'd like something more refined and still. So tune-in to the area where there already is stillness in the awareness, where there already is stillness in the breath, and let the rapture do its thing. You don't have to play along with it anymore. You go under the radar, below the rapture, into a level of more subtle ease: relaxed and equanimous.

In the Canon the distinction between these two levels is described in terms of two different images. One is of a lake fed by a cool spring: That's the second jhana. There's a sense of upwelling, a movement of the waters. The cool water from the spring spreads to fill the whole lake effortlessly. There's no conscious

effort, unlike the image of the bathman, who is deliberately working the water through the bath powder dough. Here the cool water just naturally spreads throughout the lake. But still there's a spreading, a sense of upwelling movement and refreshment.

In the image for the third jhana, though, the waters of the lake are totally still. Lotus flowers are growing totally submerged in the water, from the tips of the roots up to the tips of the flowers. No movement at all. Just the coolness of the water saturating them. As things get more and more connected, even the subtle movement of the breath in and out grows still. The awareness is still. The breath is still. Both fill the body with their stillness. This is the fourth jhana. In the image of this jhana, the water disappears altogether. There's just a light, white cloth covering the body. The equanimity here weighs less than the pleasure you've been soaking in, and your awareness throughout the body is very clear.

This is when your concentration is really strong. It's not the kind of concentration that blots out other things. It's just there. You've got the perception that gently but steadily holds it there. The world outside is still around you, but you don't send your awareness out to it. You stay with the sense of stillness in the breath, stillness in the body, stillness in the awareness.

There's a great sense of freedom, although there's still the subtle work of staying here. You don't want to drop it. But it's not nearly as complex as the earlier stages of concentration. Getting the mind to settle down like this is like a mother hen trying to gather her chicks together. In the beginning the chicks are running all over the place. The hen has to run here and there to round them up, but gradually she brings them into a smaller and smaller range until finally they all settle down together under her wings. That's the way it is with concentration. You're not trying to blot out anything; you just maintain your focus and gather everything in. The closer these things come together, the less effort involved in keeping tabs on them. Another image they use in Thailand is of a red ant. The red ant, when it bites, just grabs on with its jaws. It doesn't let go. You can pull at its body, but the jaws stay in place even when its head has torn off.

So all you have to do is gather all your attention on the perception and sensation of the breath throughout the body, and then just hang on. If you do it skillfully, with this enlarged awareness, you settle down and develop a sense of concentration that's easy to maintain. If everything is focused just on one point, that concentration will easily be destroyed with the slightest movement. You may be able to maintain it when you're sitting very still, but as soon as you have to move the body, it's gone. But with the whole-body awareness like this, where there's a sense of being settled and established with the entire body your frame, your center of gravity is low. The mind is broadly based, and isn't easily tipped over.

Even as you get up from the meditation, you can maintain that sense of full body as you walk around, as you deal with other things. It may not actually qualify as jhana, but it's a steady foundation. It's your foundation of mindfulness. It's an establishing of mindfulness, which after all is the theme or *nimitta* of the meditation. When the Buddha used the word *nimitta*, he didn't mean a vision or a light. He meant the topic of your meditation. And the topic of your meditation is what? It's the four *satipatthana*: the body in and of itself, feelings in and of themselves, mind in and of itself, or mental qualities in and of themselves—all of which are right here.

It doesn't take much to move from body to feelings, or feelings to mind states, or mind states to mental qualities. They're very close together right here. But you choose one as your primary foundation or frame of reference. For instance, try to relate everything to the breath. As feelings come and go, see how they relate to the breath. How does the breath cause them? Which way of breathing helps to induce feelings of ease and rapture? When the ease and rapture seem to be coarse, which ways of breathing or conceiving of the breath allow everything to settle down into a more subtle state of equanimity? Which ways of breathing allow you to gain what the Buddha called an enlarged awareness, *mahaggatam cittam*.

In the foundations of mindfulness or the frames of reference, he talks about different ways of categorizing the mind. As you read through the list, you see that the categories get more and more refined as your concentration gets more and more refined. So which ways of breathing help the mind get more refined? In terms of mental qualities, which ways of breathing are associated with the hindrances, which ways of breathing are associated with the factors for awakening? For example, the first three factors—mindfulness, the analysis of qualities, and persistence—are related to your directed thought and evaluation, trying to see what's skillful and what's not, trying to induce what's skillful and let go of what's not. How do you use the breath to develop these factors in such a way that gathers the remaining qualities—rapture and refreshment, calm, concentration and equanimity—here in the stages of concentration?

You want to hold onto the breath as your main frame of reference so that you don't get scattered. If you find yourself getting scattered, just drop those connections and stay simply with the sensation of the breath. Learn how to read your mind, to see when the mind is ready to start investigating these connections and when it really needs to just sit down and be still. Stay with the one perception that acts as a thread, keeps the mind right here, sews your awareness together with the body. You're creating a place where insight can arise. It requires a good solid foundation, a low center of gravity so that it's not easily knocked off. If you flit around from one frame of reference to another, you miss a lot of things, because in the flitting around there are going to be gaps. A lot of interesting things happen in the gaps, which you tend to miss. So think of your mindfulness of the breath as a long piece of thread that sews everything together over time. Anything that comes up in the body or in the mind, try to relate it to the breath.

This is the kind of concentration that can provide a good foundation for insight, for discernment. Its range of view is all around, with few blind spots. The stronger this concentration, the more refined the discernment you can develop. So don't worry about when to stop doing concentration and to start doing discernment work. As the Buddha said, it requires a certain amount of tranquility and insight in order to get the mind to settle down into strong concentration; then once it's in strong concentration, your tranquility and insight get more refined.

These things go together. You may find yourself leaning in one direction or another at any one time, but don't lean so hard that things tip over or get scattered. Try to keep everything together like this. The mind can then begin to cut through a lot of defilements, a lot of problems in a way that it couldn't when it was scattered. Ajaan Lee gives the image of gathering everything into a single

drill bit that drills down into the earth in one place. Your concentration is here. Your mindfulness is here. Your insight is here. When they're all working together, the drill bit can go deep and cut through anything—even rock—because all these qualities are working together.