

Meditators at Work

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Sometimes you hear people say that the practice is all about staying in the present moment. If you can be fully present to the present, they say, then that's all you have to do. You've arrived at the goal—which is not the Buddha's take at all. In the Canon, when he talks about focusing on the present moment, it's always in the context of death contemplation: that there's work to be done, and you don't know how much time you have, but you do know you have the present moment, so this is where you focus to do the work.

And what is the work? As Ajaan Lee says, the work of concentration is directed thought and evaluation. When you focus on the breath, that's directed thought. And then you evaluate the breath.

When we hear the factors of jhana explained, it sounds like something new we have to do: We've got to start engaging in directed thought and evaluation. But actually we're doing that all the time. Directed thought and evaluation are simply another way of expressing how we talk to ourselves. We think about a topic and then we make comments on it, we ask questions, we evaluate. That's our inner conversation.

So we're already engaged in directed thought and evaluation, we're already talking to ourselves—probably too much. What the Buddha's asking us to do is to focus that activity on one thing right now. And that's the breath.

The first question is, where do you feel the breath? Or even the question before that is, what is the breath? For our purposes, we're going to focus not so much on the air coming in and out through the nose, but the sense of energy in the body. These energies can be felt on many levels. There's the energy that allows the air to come in and go out, but there are also energies that flow through the blood, flow through the nerves. These are not mentioned in the Pali Canon. The Buddha does say that there's an aspect of the breath energy going throughout every part of the body, but he doesn't mention how to use it in meditation.

There's one school of thought that claims we shouldn't think in these terms because they're not mentioned in the Canon. But this is Ajaan Lee's solution to a problem that's posed by the Canon and not really solved in the Canon, which is that once there's a sense of ease in the breath, you let it permeate the body. How do you do that? Well, thinking about the breath energies is a very helpful way of doing that.

You focus on the spot in the body where the breath energy is most prominent right now. When you can stay there, you can ask yourself: Is the breath comfortable? And how do you know if it's comfortable or not? Well, you can try different ways of breathing. This is part of the evaluation: You think of long breathing, that's directed thought, and then you watch long breathing for a while. Then you direct your thought to short breathing, watch that for a while. Evaluate it, and then decide which is better. You can also try in long and out short, in short, out long.

And notice how you go about the breathing. When you breathe in, does tension build up? When you breathe out, do you squeeze it out? Try not to do that. Let the breath come in and fill the body in a smooth way. When you breathe out, let the breath go out on its own. You don't have to force it out. It's not like a toothpaste tube: You're not squeezing it out to the end. Let the breath, as it's going out, stop where it feels natural, where it feels good. Don't squeeze it out any more than that. The same as when the breath comes in: Watch how this feels right now.

This is our work, but it's also a kind of play. You get to play around with the breath energies, play around with your perceptions around the breath. You can think of the body as a big sponge and, as you breathe in, the energy is coming in through all the pores. Or if you prefer, you can think of the energy starting within the body, at any one of the centers that Ajaan Lee mentions. Then ask yourself: Is there anything getting in the way of that spreading smoothly and easily through the body? Any patterns of tension, any tightness? See if you can relax the tension, relax the tightness. Once the breath feels good, then think about it spreading through all the breath energies throughout the body.

This is where the concept of the breath-*body* comes in handy. Remind yourself that breath, of all the elements, is the one that's most immediately apparent to your awareness. You know about the solidity of the body, you know about the coolness and warmth of the body, all through the breath. If you have the image that the breath has to get forced through the solid parts of the body, try to erase that image. Make the breath prior—it's already there. Give it precedence over the solid parts. This makes it a lot easier to think of the cool pleasure of the breath spreading through the different parts of the body as the in-breath spreads through the breath already there.

And then maintain that comfortable breath. This is the part of the meditation that most of us have trouble with. We can work for a while with the breath, but then just staying with it once it gets good goes against the grain. We think that

there must be something next, and then something next. Well, what's next is the *maintenance*.

And it's not that you sit there dully. It requires a lot of alertness to keep the sense of well-being going. After all, vagrant thoughts can come up at any time, and you want to make sure you don't get waylaid by them. And one of the worst vagrant thoughts is the one that says, "This is boring." You have to remind yourself: This is a skill you're learning. Learn how to be captivated by the skill.

There was a study one time of people who were really good at sports, as opposed to people who are just good. We're talking about the real geniuses, the physical geniuses in the sport. The question was, what made them different from the ordinary good athletes? And they discovered that these people were really fascinated by the sport. All the different possibilities, all the different tricks, all the different situations that come up: Thinking about these things, imagining these things and how you would deal with a problem if that came up— that captivated their imagination.

So see if you can get the breath to captivate your imagination. Think of all the different organs in the body that need to be nourished. If you know you have a particular disease, see if you can think of the breath as helping cure that disease, and how you would breathe to help cure that disease. Or if you know that you have a tendency to a particular disease, as a genetic tendency in your family, how would you compensate for that to prevent it? There's a lot to be explored here.

We're not here just to treat diseases, but that's one of the ways of getting the mind to really want to focus on the breath, to pay attention to it, and to take an interest in it. Then you can get into the issue of when you have a vagrant thought, what happened to the breath? How does the breath relate to the types of thoughts that come up into the mind? Some ways of breathing tend to aggravate anger and irritation; other ways of breathing tend to aggravate greed or fear. How can you tell when you're slipping into that kind of breath?

There's a lot to explore here, a lot to play with. This is our work, but it's work done in a sense of well-being, done with a sense of freedom. Nobody's forcing you to do this. It's like being a child and picking up a musical instrument. Nobody's forcing you to pick it up. You simply want to explore it: What kind of sounds can we get out of this? At first you've just got to bang around or strum around pretty randomly. But after a while you begin to get tired of the random sounds and you want to do something that's nicer, more pleasing. And you take an interest in issues of technique.

Again, the instrument captures your imagination; the music captures your imagination. In the same way, let the sense of well-being that can come from the

breath capture your imagination as well.

You can sit here. Be very careful, as I said, not to squeeze the breath energy out. Allow it to get full. Then as you breathe out, maintain that sense of fullness even as the breath goes out. When you can do that, then see: Can you do this as you get up and walk around? Can you do this as you're dealing with other simple chores? Can you do it dealing with more complex chores? When talking to other people, can you maintain this sense of full well-being? You'll learn a lot about the mind as you try to do that.

This is why the maintenance is such an important part of the meditation. And once there's a full sense of well-being, then directed thought and evaluation can fall by the wayside. This may be a little disorienting at first. You suddenly find yourself just with the breath, feeling one with the breath and not thinking about it. It takes a little while to gain a sense of balance to do that, but we're thinking our way to stillness here—this is our work. And when we get the stillness, we try to maintain that. Try to get good at it. Don't get tired of the maintenance just yet, because the more you can find that the still mind is its default mode, then the easier it is to see when unskillful things come up, and you can deal with them—because you're coming from a sense of well-being, a sense of stability, a sense of centered but all-around awareness that doesn't allow for any blind spots in your mind. Or any blind spots in the body.

So this is how we get our work done in the present moment: taking the mind's tendency to chatter to itself and talk to itself, and putting it to a good purpose: a sense of satisfaction that's so all-around that you then get to the point where you don't really feel the need to chatter any more. This is not the goal of the practice, but it's an important step.

So do the work that needs to be done, find a sense of enjoyment, let it capture your imagination. That's how you find that ultimately there is no distinction between work and play as you get the mind to settle down.