

Friends with the Breath, Friends with the Buddha

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Ajaan Fuang has a nice passage where he talks about the breath as being like a nursemaid who's been looking after you for all your life, but you haven't paid that much attention to her to see what kind of person she is, why she's been so kind to you. Whether you pay attention or not, she keeps breathing in, breathing out. Of course, if she's neglected she can't do her best for you.

So, give her some attention. How does the breath feel right now? Is it long? Is it short? Heavy? Light? What kind of breathing feels good right now?—because the breath is nourishment for the body, and it's most nourishing when it feels refreshing.

The breath becomes even a better friend if you make friends with it. You do it in the same way that you make friends with someone: You have to listen, you have to ask questions, notice. People don't tell you all about themselves all at once, and often the things they don't tell you are most important for establishing a friendship.

So try to be observant. Which parts of the body feel nourished by the breath? Which ones don't feel nourished? What can you do to give them some nourishment, too? Are you clamping down too hard on the breath? Or not enough?

This is something you have to learn over time, just as with a friendship. You don't become fast friends in a day. It takes a while to get to know the other person. But fortunately the breath is always there to help you.

You need it as a friend because you've got all these other people in your head as well, all the committee members, and you don't know where you picked them all up. Some of them are thoughts you've come up with on your own. Others are things you picked up from people around you: some well-meaning but ignorant, others even ill-meaning. So you can't trust everything that's coming up in the mind.

Even the members that you developed yourself: Sometimes they were committee members that came from a desire you had when you were young and you thought you'd figured something out for gaining that desire but didn't really look at it carefully.

So you have to do a lot of sorting out here. It's very easy to fall for the voices that are very insistent, persistent, insinuating, so you need a good friend inside.

In addition to the breath, it's also good to think of the Buddha as your friend.

When a question comes up, ask yourself: What would the Buddha say?

We all know the story of Sona the monk who'd been very delicately brought up and was doing meditation to the point where his feet were bleeding. He was getting discouraged. "Maybe I could just disrobe and go back home and make merit."

The Buddha was on Vulture Peak at the time, so he disappeared from Vulture Peak and appeared right in front of Sona. How would you feel if the Buddha appeared right in front of you right now? Especially if you were thinking thoughts like that?

Sona was probably pretty embarrassed, but the Buddha wasn't there to embarrass him. He was there to help. He gave him the image of the lute. Sona had played the lute when he was a layperson, so the Buddha asked him about how he played the lute. When it was tuned too tight or too loosely, in neither case did it sound right. It had to be tuned just right.

Apparently the lutes in those days had five strings, so the Buddha compared the five faculties to the five strings. The string that you tuned first was the persistence or the energy faculty. How much energy do you have right now? What are you capable of right now? Start there and then tune all the other faculties to that, in the same way that you would tune one string in the lute and then tune the other strings to the first string.

So ask yourself, if the Buddha were here right now standing in front of you, what kind of help would he give you? What teaching would be most helpful?

His teachings have their ideal. There's a goal toward which they're all aimed. But they start in all kinds of different places. The Buddha didn't insist that you had to have a certain level of mastery before you could ordain or a certain level of mastery before you could meditate. In fact, he often assumed that people didn't have much mastery at all.

So in some cases where people did have a lot of experience, he'd start in at a very advanced stage of the practice. With other people, the teachings would be more basic. But he was happy to start wherever he had to. The consistency in the teachings is all in that they lead to the goal. They differ only in that they start from different places, for different people, with different assumptions. All the Buddha asked is two things. One, was that you be truthful, and two, that you be observant.

So if there are a lot of crazy committee members chattering right now, admit that, but realize also that you don't have to go along with them. You've got the breath here; you've got the Buddha's teachings. They're your friends.

As the chant said just now: Treat them with respect. Good friends are hard to find.

So you're not here to try to measure up to an ideal. You start where you are and then you work from that, bit by bit, realizing that being truthful means not only being truthful about where you are but also about the fact that you do have potential—as long as you're truthful, specifically about what you do and the results you're getting.

That's what the quality of alertness is all about. When you're focusing on the present moment, alertness is not about being with anything at all coming up in the present. Its focus is on what you're doing. Be very clear about that. Then ask yourself: Are the results the results you want? If they're not, what can you change?

Give the teachings a serious try. They're not all that mysterious. They're very straightforward, simply that sometimes they ask you to stretch your boundaries, to push the envelope about what you think you can do.

And again, what's that voice that says you can only do so much or that you can't do anything at all? Voices like that aren't necessarily helpful voices. Sometimes they may sound realistic, but that's just a guise they put on.

You start where you are and you take the next step and then the next step and then the next step. If you try to take a step that's not where you are, it doesn't work. So be truthful about where you are and be observant about what can be changed. And remember you've got the Buddha there. One of the contemplations is reflecting on the Buddha. That can sometimes give you encouragement.

After all, you look at all the people he taught: everybody from poor people to rich people. He sympathized with both. Men, women, children. Educated people, cowherds. He was willing to teach everybody who was willing to learn. All he asked was that you give his teachings a genuine try.

So there's a teaching in there someplace for where you are right now. You might ask yourself, "If the Buddha were here right now, what specific step would he recommend?"

That way you've got two friends. You've got the breath and you've got the Buddha. And with that kind of support you can go far.