

## *Groundwork*

*January 22, 2017*

When you meditate, it's like building a home for the mind, and whenever you build a home, you have to do the groundwork. Here our groundwork is thinking about the breath and observing the breath. So take a couple good long, deep in-and-out breaths, and notice where you feel the breathing process in the body. When we talk about breath here, it's not so much the air coming in and out of the lungs. It's the flow of energy in the body: the rise and fall of the abdomen; the expansion and contraction of the rib cage. Sometimes your shoulders get involved. Sometimes other parts of the body get involved. As you get more and more sensitive to the breathing process in the body, you begin to realize that the entire nervous system is involved, all the way down to the tips of your fingers and the tips of your toes. But in the beginning, focus on the areas that are most obvious to you and try to find a rhythm of breathing that feels good.

This double process of paying attention to the breath and then evaluating how it's going: The technical terms for that are direct thought and evaluation. Directed thought is focusing your mind in a particular direction, and then continually reminding yourself to stay there, because the nature of the mind is that it doesn't listen to directions well. You tell it to think about one thing, and it'll think about something else. In fact, the more you tell it not to think about something, the more it's going to think about it, so you've got to curb that tendency.

Remind yourself of why it's good to be here: It's because your intentions are happening here. Your intentions are what determine what you're going to do and say and think, and you want to be very clear about those intentions. Then they won't be taken over by unskillful mind states and they actually will be in the interest of your true welfare and happiness, and the true welfare and happiness of others.

So we need to be here to watch these things. All too often, we put our intentions on automatic pilot and go running off. It's like telling your workers to clear some land, and then you run away, go off, and have a good time. Sometimes they'll do a good job, and sometimes they won't, but to make sure they do a good job, you've got to be here watching over them. And the breath is the best way to guarantee that you're going to be here in the present moment, because there is no future breath you can watch and no past breath you can watch. You've got the breath right here, right now, so it keeps you anchored.

So keep reminding yourself this is a good place to stay. Stay right here with the breath, even if nothing is happening quite yet. It's not going to happen until you've been here for a while and have settled in. That's the directed thought.

Evaluation is when you notice how well it's going. Is the breath the kind of breath that's easy to stay with? Would it be better if it were longer or shorter, deeper, more shallow, heavier, lighter, faster, slower? Experiment for a while to see what kind of breathing feels good. You can also evaluate your perception of the breath. If you think of it having to come through those two little holes in your nostrils, there tends to be a fair amount of pressure pulling the breath in, pushing it out. So hold a different perception in mind. Think of the breath coming in and out through every pore in the body. The body is like a big sponge, with lots of holes where the breath energy can enter and leave. And try to notice as you breathe in: Are there any parts of the body where there's unnecessary tension? If you see something tensing up as you breathe in or tensing up as you breathe out, see if you can relax it so that no new tension builds up as you breathe in, and you don't hold on to any tension as you breathe out. And just keep doing this.

Evaluation together with directed thought here are the discernment factors of concentration practice. The Buddha identifies them with a high level of what he calls right resolve. In ordinary right resolve, you resolve not to indulge in thoughts of sensual pleasures, not to indulge in thoughts of ill will, not to indulge in thoughts of harmfulness. Then as the mind begins to settle down, that level of right resolve turns into the directed thought and evaluation of concentration, because you realize you could be thinking thoughts of renunciation, goodwill, compassion, and there wouldn't be any harm in that aside from the fact that it tires the mind, and when the mind is tired, it can start doing things you don't want it to do. It starts getting sloppy.

So the mind needs to rest, and in getting it to rest properly, you bring it to a higher level of right resolve. You direct your thoughts to the breath. You evaluate the breath for the purpose of settling down. So do the groundwork well. Clear away all the stumps. Clear away all the ant nests and other things that might make it difficult for you to build a good solid house here.

Now, there comes a point where the mind has settled down to the extent that you don't need to do so much evaluation anymore, and even your directed thought is not so necessary because you're more and more at one with the breath. It feels better because you've given rise to a sense of ease and rapture, and that's what enables the mind to stay here. It really does give you a sense that you're at home here. If the breath feels uncomfortable, you're going to want to go away someplace else. It's like having a house that's not very well built, with no really

good place to lie down. You're going to go looking for your entertainment and your pleasure someplace else.

So clean the area. Figure out what kind of breathing would give rise to a sense of pleasure, a sense of refreshment—or in Ajaan Lee's terminology, fullness. One technique you might try is to think of your hands right now, and think of every muscle in the hand relaxing. Everything's very relaxed. See if you can hold that sense of relaxation in the hands as you breathe in, as you breathe out, so that the in-breath and the out-breath don't harm that sense of fullness. As the hand is relaxed, it'll feel more and more full. Once the energy there is full, then you allow that full sense of energy to spread up the arms, down the spine, up into the head, in all directions. It'll be accompanied by a sense of lightness, a sense of sufficiency.

You're right here and you have enough to feel good about being here in the body. That's what enables you to stay here long enough so that you can actually watch the mind and begin to see where an intention begins to gather itself—because it's not the case that you won't have distracting thoughts while you do this. They'll come. This is where directed thought has to keep reminding you that's not where you go. It's like standing on the side of the road and somebody driving past, and you just see them drive past, but you don't have to follow them down the road. You've got other work to do right here, so you keep directing your thought back to the breath, back to the breath.

At first, you find that you've been kidnapped by those thoughts time and again, but after a while you begin to gain a sense of when a thought is beginning to gather. There's a little stirring in someplace in the body, and the mind will slap a label on it, say "Oh, this is a thought about this" or "That's a thought about that." And then it goes running with it. Well, if you can catch it before the label gets slapped on, you see that this is just a little stirring of tension in the breath energy field in the body. If you can breathe through it—think of it combing out tangles in the energy—then the thought won't form.

You've learned an important lesson that helps you think the thoughts you want to think and learn how to ignore the thoughts you don't. That gives you more control over your intentions. Something comes up in the mind and you're in a position to watch it and not only to watch it but also have a sense of satisfaction with being with the breath that makes you less inclined to want to go with anything that's unskillful.

This changes the balance of power in the mind. You're more in control because the mind is well fed here in its home, well rested. But to have that sense of being rested requires some work. As I said, it's the groundwork so that you can build a good house. Or if your concentration isn't a house yet, think of it as clearing the

ground so you can put up a tent and there won't be sticks and stones and other things sticking through the floor of the tent making it hard to lie down.

If you found that you've lost the breath, just come right back. Direct your thoughts back to the breath. Direct them back to the breath. Each time you come back, reward yourself with a breath that feels especially good. What would feel really gratifying right now in terms of the breath energy in the body? Sometimes all you have to do is pose that question in the mind, and the body will respond. And how can you maintain that sense of feeling gratified as you breathe in and out again?—not only with the in-breath and the out-breath, but also between the breaths, so that the whole breath cycle feels light, full, spacious, at ease, perfectly balanced. That's when you've got good shelter for the mind.

So lay the groundwork well. Clear things out so that the mind can have a sense of being at home here. And once it's at home, then it can really do the important work of learning how to gain some control of your intentions—this factor of your life that shapes everything you experience—so that you're in a position where you can shape things well.