

Energizing Your Meditation

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There's a common problem when you come to meditate, especially at night: It's been a long day, you've been working hard, you want some rest. So you find a calm way of breathing, and think about how to put the mind in a calm state, putting that thought of "resting" foremost in your awareness. Often, you end up putting yourself to sleep, which is not meditation at all. Meditation means developing. You're not trying to develop sloth and torpor; you're trying to develop alertness, ardency, mindfulness.

So it's good to remember the Buddha's analogy of lighting a fire. As long as the fire's still weak, you don't pour ashes on it, you don't pour water on it. You give it more fuel; you fan the flames. In other words, you put more energy into it and, if you do it correctly, you get more energy out.

He gives this analogy when he's talking about the factors for awakening. The energizing factors are analysis of qualities, persistence, and rapture. Those are the factors you have to emphasize at the beginning of the meditation—especially when you're tired—holding in mind the perception that, yes, you do have to put some energy in if you're going to get some energy out. But you have to do it in the right way. Otherwise, you tire yourself out.

The energy there is going to be in the rapture. That's the resulting energy that you want. Remember that rapture's a quality you experience both in body and in mind by how you fashion the body through the way you breathe. This is why Ajaan Lee recommends, at the beginning of the meditation, that you take three or seven good, long, deep in-and-out breaths, and only then think of calming the breath down. And even then, you may not want to calm it down quite yet.

I know some people complain about this part of his method. I remember when I first read about the Buddha's teaching on the breath meditation, I was told that in yoga you manipulate the breath, but in the Buddhist practice you don't change the breath at all. And to this day there are people who make this a partisan issue, saying that Ajaan Lee's method is non-Buddhist—it's a yoga method, or a brahmanical method—because he manipulates the breath. But nowhere does the Buddha say not to manipulate the breath. In fact, he says, as part of his breath meditation instructions, "Breathe in and out sensitive to rapture; experiencing rapture." He doesn't mean simply sitting there, waiting until the rapture somehow comes on its own. You've got to induce it.

And you can do that by the way you breathe. How else could you do it? The breath is the only physical function that you can manipulate so easily. So you try long in and short out; get more oxygen into your system.

Then look at the way you squeeze your energy as you breathe. There are two stages in the breathing cycle where you tend to squeeze it. One, primarily on the out-breath: You fill the body with the breath and then you squeeze it out. But is there a way you can breathe it out without squeezing? The squeezing is what depletes the energy, prevents that sense of rapture or refreshment from developing. You can tell yourself: You'll do the in-breath, and the body will do the out-breath on its own, without your having to help. Just monitor things until you reach a point where it feels like the breath energy's being depleted, and then you breathe in again.

The other place where you tend to squeeze it is between the in-breath and the out-breath—or between the out-breath and the in-breath—as a sort of marker. After all, you're trying to remember, "Now the breath is coming in; now the breath is going out." Where's the line that divides them? You tend to create a line with a little squeeze. Well, you don't have to do that. Again, that prevents the rapture from developing. Think of a smooth exchange of energy: energy coming into energy, and you're here just riding it, like riding a wave. Or you think of the breath all around you, and you're wearing it.

This gets to the other part: the rapture as a part of the mind; refreshment as a feature of the mind. You remember what fashions the mind: feelings and perceptions. So notice what kind of perceptions you have about the breath. As the Buddha said, once there is a sense of rapture or refreshment, you want it to spread to fill the whole body. Think of the bathman kneading moisture through a ball of bath powder, or the spring filling a lake with its cool waters. You want to think of the whole body as being open and wide, and the breath can flow anywhere in the body: down the legs, down the arms, in through the eyes, in through the ears. Hold those perceptions in mind.

Then again, if you notice there's any sense of squeezing anywhere in the body, as you get more and more sensitive to the whole body breathing—the whole body breathing in; the whole body breathing out—just breathe right through those little sensations of squeezing. So you've got the breath breathing the breath. You're wearing the breath; it's all around you.

Then it's simply a question of maintaining it, staying right there. In this case, you're staying with that sense of energy filling the body—which is much different from simply staying with whatever, because here you're staying with something that gives you the wherewithal to keep going, to be alert, to be awake. Ajaan Lee

has a nice image. He says it's like spreading an electric line throughout the body: We've got electric lines going down through the arms, through the legs, through the torso. In that way, you can light up the entire countryside.

Of course, there does come the point where that gets a little bit too much. Some people find it actually threatening—in some cases, because they've had experience drowning—and there is that sense of being close to drowning when everything permeates the body in this way. But you're not drowning in water; you're drowning in energy, you're drowning in air. But still, the whole idea of drowning can be threatening. Other people, who tend to bottle up their emotions, find it threatening to be unbottled like this.

So here again, you have to work with the way you breathe and with your perceptions. If long in and short out is giving you more energy, try to think, "short in and long out" to calm things down. If your perceptions are giving rise to a sense of energy flowing everywhere, use your perceptions again, but this time think of excess energy flowing out of the body.

Ajaan Fuang would often talk about having excess energy flowing out the palms of the hands, the soles of the feet, into the air. I've also found that the spaces between the fingers, the spaces between the toes are good exit spots. You could also think of excess energy going out the eyes.

But what's important is that—if there's any warning in the mind that you're in a place of danger with all this energy—you've got to change that perception. Sit the mind down and speak to it in a very calm voice, and say, "Look, you're fine. It's simply energy flowing, that's all."

And if there's any physical pressure, think of what it is that causes pressure: liquid flowing against solid. You've got the blood flowing against the walls of its vessels. So again, change the perception. Think of the flow as being energy. Energy can permeate anything. This lattice of atoms that is your body is not even really a lattice. It's more like a cloud, and between the drops of the cloud there's space. So think of space all around, permeating everything.

The energy can flow out, say, the base of your spine. That's another image from Ajaan Fuang. He would get headaches, where it felt like the energy was flowing too much up to his head. His solution was to think of it going down the spine, out the base of the spine, into the ground.

And remind yourself that there are many layers of energy in the body. If this layer of rapturous energy seems to be too strong, well, at the same spot where there's strong energy there's also a layer of gentle energy. Hold that perception in mind, and you'll find it.

This teaches you an important lesson about perception: When you allow yourself to perceive things in a certain way, you see that there is often a corresponding reality. Now, this is not always the case. Otherwise, you could make up any reality you wanted to. But reality has many layers, and often there are lots of things we don't see because we don't allow ourselves to imagine them. If you don't like the idea of working with your imagination, remind yourself that, as a child, you had to imagine that the world was round. It really is round, but it doesn't look round; it looks flat. But if you get way up in space you realize, yes, it is round. If you try to fly from Los Angeles, say, to Moscow, you don't fly simply to the east-northeast; you fly way up north and come arching down, and in that way, you save time. That wouldn't work if the world were not round. So there are certain things you have to allow yourself to imagine before you realize the reality is there.

And here it is: There are many layers of energy in the body. What you're doing as you meditate is learning how to tap into what layer you need. When your fire is too weak, you tap into the layers that are going to help get the fire going. If it's going too strong, you tap into the layers that will calm it down: the perceptions that calm it down, the water and the ashes that can reduce the flame.

In this way, you can adjust it so that it's just right. You're here, poised, finding that right balance between still and alert; quiet and active. And in the course of adjusting things like this, you've learned a lot about the mind. This is how insight and tranquility can be practiced together. You've learned how to use the processes of fabrication and, at the same time, you've found a quality of alertness and stillness that give the mind some genuine rest.