

## *A Diffuse Light*

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We have a book in our library with pictures of the peaks in California that are over 14,000 feet tall. It's a lovely book. At the back of the book is the photographer's note. He talks about how when he was younger, he used to travel the Sierras with a famous photographer who was known for his dramatic photos with sharp contrasts and intense colors. So when this photographer decided to set out and photograph all the peaks over 14,000 feet, he wanted the same effect.

He took pictures right at dawn or right at sunset with the mountains picking up the colors of the rising or the setting sun, with intense oranges and pinks. But as he took rolls and rolls of film, he began to notice that he actually preferred the pictures before sunrise and after sunset, when there was a softened and diffuse light. All the details of the peaks stood out; each detail stood out and was given equal prominence. In the end, the photographs in that diffuse light were the ones he chose for the book.

The book reminds me of a perception that's very useful in the meditation. We usually think of the breath being done by certain parts of the body and not by other parts. Some of your muscles are the workers, and the others are the freeloaders. When we focus on the breath, we tend to focus on the workers and leave the freeloaders in the background. So we get an unbalanced picture.

In the beginning of the meditation, it's useful. You need a place to keep your focus anchored. And the conception of the breath goes either: "That's the one spot where you're inhaling," or "That's the one spot that's doing the work of sucking in the air, sucking in a breath."

Then you can move from that—the perception of the breath coming from the outside—to the perception of the breath originating inside.

Here again, there are centers of the breath, where the breathing sensations stand out. Ajaan Lee talks about them: the top of the head, the middle of the head, the palate, the base of the throat, the tip of the sternum, the point just above the navel. Those are just a few. You can think of the breath radiating from those spots. If you sense any spot where there's a blockage as that breath energy radiates from it, you allow the blockage to dissolve. This perception gets you closer to a state where you can breathe more and more calmly. You don't feel the need to pull breath energy in from outside because you realize it's already there inside.

But you can move that perception even further. You can think of every cell in the body as being a little breath center, expanding and contracting. Everybody has

the same weight, everybody pulls the same weight, and you try to expand your awareness to be in touch with all of those parts of the breath energy without giving prominence to any one.

You begin to see a lot of details of the breath energy in the body that you would otherwise miss. At the same time, there's a very strong sense that there's never any moment when the body doesn't have breath. It's all there all the time. So you can stay with these breath sensations all the way through the in-breath, all the way through the out, and all the way in between. In this way, your focus doesn't have pauses.

In other words, often when we meditate, our attention is present in phrases, like phrases of music. A few notes are connected, and there's a pause. The next few notes are connected. Then there's a pause. Or like a movie where there are many different takes. There's a short take here, then the camera angle shifts, and there's a short take there. It's very rare that you have one long, single take where the camera doesn't move, or you don't leave that particular camera angle. But when you can stay with the one camera angle and have a long take, it's a lot calmer. You notice this with TV nowadays. The little bits and pieces of which the shows are composed are a lot shorter. It's very frazzling for the nerves. But if you have one long take, it's much more calming.

And here, your long take can be that every cell in the body is breathing in; every cell in the body is breathing out. They're all right there all the time. It's as if the body were filled with a diffuse light, and all the details stand out. This is probably *the* best perception you can have to get the mind into strong states of concentration where the breath is minimal and yet you don't feel starved of breath. You actually feel full.

It may take a while to work up to this. You do start out with a sense that you're going to spotlight some parts of the body rather than others, as you get going with the breath at the beginning of each meditation session. But there will come a time when you want to switch, first to the perception that the breath originates inside, and then to the perception that the breath originates with every cell equally throughout the body.

See what that does to help the mind settle down. You're calming mental fabrication. In other words, the perception of the breath originating in every cell is much calmer than the perception of the breath originating in any one spot to the detriment of others. It gets the mind calmer and it gets the breath calmer as well.

This is one of the ways in which the tetrads in the breath meditation are all happening at the same time. You're calming bodily fabrication by calming mental

fabrication. It's in this way that you can begin to see how all four tetrads—the tetrad related to the body, the tetrad related to feelings, the tetrad related to the mind, and the tetrad related to dhammas—help one another along.

As you get more sensitive to the process of fabrication, energize it in the beginning and then calm it down. You're following the same pattern of the factors for awakening. You energize with analysis, which builds on mindfulness, followed by effort and rapture. Then you calm things down with calm, concentration, and equanimity. It's that active analysis of qualities that helps you see fabrication, while the final ones help you to calm fabrication down. You see the body and the mind working together in this way for the sake of a very stable, solid awareness.

That allows you to pick up insights in areas that used to be hidden by the fact that the spotlight was someplace else. After all, wherever there's a spotlight, there's going to be a lot of darkness around it. But where there's a diffuse light, everything is allowed to glow with its own inner light. Everything can show itself for what it is.