

Savor Your Breath

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To really enjoy the breath meditation, you have to learn how to savor your breath. And there are different ways you can do that, as there are with savoring a sensual pleasure, like fine food, beautiful music. Part of it is putting yourself in a receptive mood, part of it is how you talk to yourself, and part of it is opening yourself up physically, especially if it's listening to music—opening yourself up to the effect it can have on you.

The same principles apply with the breath. First remind yourself that this is the force of life that you're watching. It only stands to reason that if it feels good inside, it's going to be good for you. It'll give you energy, soothe the nerves, nourish the muscles that have been overworked. It can do a lot of good.

Then try to make yourself receptive. Try to notice which parts of the body are most sensitive to how an in-breath feels, or how an out-breath feels, but particularly the in-breath. If you're not sure, hold the breath for a bit until you feel you've got to breathe. Then as the breath comes in, you'll notice certain parts of the body really feel relieved.

Those are the parts you should focus on. Those are your sensitive parts. For some people the most sensitive spot is in the chest, in the area around the heart. Or it could be behind your eyes, in the middle of the head, or in the throat. So explore for a while where your spots are.

Pay special attention to the in-breath, because that's the energizing breath. The in-breath is something you do. The out-breath is something you should learn how not to squeeze out. You do the in-breathing; the body will allow the breath back out again at its own pace. Then when you feel the need to breathe in again, then breathe in.

Sometimes it's good to try regulate the rhythm. They've done research that a rhythm in which you take five or six seconds for the in-breath, five or six seconds for the out-breath, and try to keep it regular like that for a while, can be extremely calming.

When you have trouble maintaining a full five-second breath, ask yourself: Which parts of the body are tensing up, preventing the breath from coming in that long? Try to relax them. Also try to get out of your head and into your body. Remind yourself that consciousness is there in all the parts of the body.

Ajaan Suwat made the comment one time that you could take an iron stake and stick into

any part of the body, and you'd know that there's pain. Suppose the spike is in the leg: It's not as if the awareness up in the middle of the head has to go running down to the leg to let you know there's pain. Your awareness in the leg lets you know right away.

So have that sense that you inhabit the whole body and you're right there with the different parts of the body that are sensitive to the breath. Especially if it's the area around the eyes, or behind the eyes: This is an area where, when we think a lot in the course of the day, the blood gets pushed around quite a bit. So if you allow it to just stay still around that area, the blood can flow in, with a sense of fullness, comfortable fullness. It doesn't feel tight or overstuffed. Then, as it's full, the breath comes in and nourishes that part of the body. It feels good, feels gratifying.

So you learn how to talk to yourself about the breath, and learn how to tune in to the parts of the body that are actually sensitive to the breath, and open yourself up to them. This way, the meditation becomes something that's not just in your head. It's actually down there in your body, the whole body, and it provides you with a place you can settle in. From then on, in it's just a matter of modulating things so that they feel just right.

Sometimes a rhythm feels good for a while, and then not so good. Well, you can change. It's entirely up to you. This is one of the areas of meditation where your preferences actually play a large role.

What kind of breathing do you like? Do you like long breathing, short breathing, fast, slow, heavy, light, deep, shallow? There are lots of variations. And you can think of the breath energy doing different things in the body: coming up from the soles of the feet, up through the legs, giving support to the spine, or going down from the top of the head. The Zen master Hakuin recommended having an image of a big ball of butter on top of your head. As you breathe in, think of the butter melting, and going down, down, down the body.

So play with the breath, play with your perceptions around the breath. Play with all the different kinds of fabrication that go into making up your sense of the present right here, right now. It's in playing with them that you get to know them.

It's like learning how to play a guitar. You take the guitar into your room, you close the door, and you pluck at it. You discover a few things that sound nice, and you play around, and find some things that don't sound so nice. You drop those. You go back to the things that sound nice. But then you start experimenting, exploring, bringing in some ingenuity, but also learning how to be sensitive. With a guitar, what sounds good to you?

With the breath, what feels good to you as you breathe in? You want to get sensitive to

this, because you're going to be getting sensitive to what the Buddha calls name and form.

"Name" covers all the different activities of the mind. "Form," of course, is the form of the body. You want to learn to be sensitive to these things on those terms, because those are the very basic terms of discernment: things as they're directly experienced. Discernment is not imposing somebody else's ideas on your mind; saying, "They say you have to see things as inconstant, stressful, not self. Okay, where's the inconstancy?" And then you come to the conclusion "Oh yeah, it's true what they say." Coming to that kind of conclusion is not what the Buddha wants.

He uses those terms, but he uses other terms, as well, for getting a sense of what's going on, and how you're building things out of the raw materials of name and form. And how it's just not good enough.

You find things that are good for a while. In fact, you're encouraged to do this. As Ajaan Lee says, you take what's inconstant and you try to make it constant. You take what's stressful and you try to make it pleasurable. You take what's not-self and you try to get it under your control as much as possible. See how far you can go in that direction.

It's only when you push up against the three perceptions like this that you find the point where they push back. And where will you find that? In your own sensitivity. And the choice to hold on or to let go is also made in your own sensitivity. No one's forcing you. But as you get more sensitive, you begin to see that there are certain things you've done, or are doing, that you used to like, but now you don't like them anymore. It's not satisfying anymore. You've found something better.

This is why an important part of meditation is to give you something to rely on, something to fall back on. You're not simply asked to learn to get detached from everything and then let go. The Buddha gives you good things to hold on to first, so that you can let go with a sense of safety—and also a sense of being rewarded by letting go. As he says, letting go is for your long-term welfare and happiness.

So we're not here simply to see things as they are. One—because we're here to see things as they *work*. How cause and effect work. And two—we're seeing these things so that we can be more discerning in knowing what forms of happiness and pleasure really are satisfying.

After all, nibbana is the ultimate pleasure—the ultimate happiness, the ultimate *sukha*: bliss, happiness, well-being. You get to appreciate it first by learning how to appreciate what feels good right here, right now, in the body.

So try to develop your sensitivity here. Learn how to savor what's pleasurable here, because it will reorient you, give you new ideas about what happiness is, what well-being is—and what's needed to find it. It also opens you up to the potentials you have right here.

Think about all the skills the Buddha found in his meditation—leading ultimately to the ultimate skill, which is the ending of the effluents. How are you going to know what an effluent is unless you get really sensitive right here?

So try to get sensitive right here in the heart, right here in the body. Explore your sensitivity. Savor what you find is good. That's how you develop your palate; that's how your discernment gets strong, strong enough to overcome a lot of the preconceived notions you bring to the breath, bring to the body, bring to your own mind, bring to life.

It's only when you find something you really like right here that you can change the way you rank pleasures in your life. Because this is a blameless happiness, it has a lot more potential than sensual pleasures. Learn how to savor the potential of well-being simply here in name and form as you've got them right here, right now.