

A Small, Steady Flame

Thanissaro Bhikkhu

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The breath is where the mind and the body meet. We often have a sense that the solid part of our bodies is the part we know best, the part we inhabit, and the breath is something that just comes in and goes out through the solid part we're inhabiting. But when you close your eyes, what do you actually sense of the body? There's a shape defined by the area where there's energy flowing back and forth. And that energy is actually our most direct perception of the body. We tend to overlook it and focus on other things, but our primary sensation is right here. It's breath.

As we meditate, we're learning to get back in touch with that primary sensation so that eventually we can use it as a mirror for the mind. Because, as I said, it's where the mind and the body meet. It's the part of the body the mind is most sensitive to, the part most immediately responsive to the mind. The way you breathe is very much affected by the states of your mind. When you're worried, you breathe in a certain way. When you're happy, you breathe in another way. When there's anger, there's still another way of breathing. If you keep at certain ways of breathing, it's going to have an effect on other aspects of the body as well. Certain ways you hold your body are really shaped by the breath. And it's through the breath that so many mental states can cause physical disease, particularly diseases related to stress.

So one of the first things you have to do as you meditate is to work through the breath energy in the body. Find a spot where the breathing feels comfortable. It might be at the tip of the nose, the middle of the chest, around the abdomen, the base of the throat. Actually it can be anywhere in the body where you feel that the sensation of in-breathing feels good and the sensation of out-breathing feels good. Then you train yourself to stay with that sensation.

In the beginning the sensation may not be all that impressive – just a simple, comfortable feeling, sometimes a neutral feeling – but you find that if you stick with it, it gets more and more relaxing, more and more comfortable.

Like a fire. In the beginning a fire starts as just a tiny little spark that you have to shelter against the wind. It takes a long time for the fuel to catch fire, but once it does, the fire begins to spread to the different parts of the fuel. It's the same with the body and the breath. You find one spot that seems small and not all that impressive, but it feels okay. Then you stay with it, and the consistency of your attention – as you keep that spot relaxed, without pushing it or pulling it or putting any pressure on it – is what allows it to develop a sense of fullness. The

longer you stick with it, the more the fullness gains strength. Once it's more solidly established, you can start allowing it to spread to different parts of the body.

The word *jhana*, or concentrated mental absorption, is related to a verb, *jhayati*, that means "to burn." Pali has lots of different words for the word "burning," and *jhayati* is used to describe a steady flame, like the flame of an oil lamp. The words for "burning" used for other types of fire – like a raging bonfire, a wood fire, or a forest fire – are something else entirely. The word for a steady, constant flame: That's *jhayati*, which relates to *jhana*. And as we practice concentration, that's the kind of consistency and steadiness we're trying to develop.

Our focus starts as a small, steady flame, and then you try to allow the steadiness to flow through the body. But first you have to establish that comfortable spot. If you go around the body adjusting the breath here, adjusting the breath there, without a real sense of comfort, then you can make things worse. You're just messing things up. So, it's important that you get this sense of ease first, and then allow things to spread from there so that your awareness fills the whole body, and your sense of comfortable breath energy fills the whole body as well.

Think of it as a healing process. Many times, as soon as the mind gets a little bit still and the breath gets comfortable, you think, "Well, what's next?" But before you can move to what's next, a lot of healing has to be done in the body – all the areas of tension and tightness and discomfort that you've allowed to take hold in the body. The breath has to very gently massage them, very gently heal them, and sometimes this takes time.

Just like a wound. You can't just say, "Poof," and it's gone. You have to put the medicine on and let it stay there for hours. In the same way, the process of healing your inner energy field takes time, so be patient with the breath. When things get still, stay with it. And even though things may not seem to be happening, there's a slow, steady process of healing going on in the body.

This is why patience is such an important part of this skill. When they talk about putting an effort into the meditation, the word for "effort" really means persistence. It's this stick-to-it-tived-ness that's going to make all the difference. The continuity of your focus, the steadiness of your persistence: Those are the qualities that make the breath a solid foundation for the mind.

One of the problems in teaching meditation to people in America is that very few of us have learned any skills requiring that kind of steadiness, that kind of patience. Here, when you sharpen a knife, you just run it through the knife sharpener – zip, zip – and it's done. Over in Thailand, though, when I had to sharpen a knife I was given a big stone and a knife and told, "Okay, be very careful not to be in too great of a hurry, because if you get impatient you may ruin the blade." So, you have to be very consistent, very steady, and very patient as you work the blade over the whetstone. As you do this, you learn all the

mental skills that go along with being patient: how not to get bored, how not to give up, the kind of conversation in the mind that helps keep it going. If you have any skills like that, think back on how you've talked yourself into being patient, consistent, persistent, and then apply those skills to the breath.

So, work with a sense of comfortable breath. Allow the breath to get comfortable, allow it to be easeful, and then allow it to spread through the body. When it begins to spread through the body and it starts working through patterns of tension, you come to a more intense sense of absorption. Stay with that. Learn the skills required to stay right at that point of balance where you're not pushing it too hard and not being too lazy or lax—just the right amount of interest, the right amount of attention and intention to keep things going—so that the breath can have a chance to heal the wounds in the body, soothe the mind, and bring both the body and the mind to the stages of practice where the concentration gets stronger and the insights sharper, more subtle.

This all depends on the groundwork. As for the question of how soon you can move on to the next step: Don't ask. Just keep on doing the work. Things will develop.

It's like waiting for a plant to grow: You can't sit there and pull it up, up, up to make it grow faster. If you do that, you uproot it, and that's the end of the plant. What you have to do is just keep watering it, applying fertilizer, removing the weeds as they come, and your patient effort will pay off as long as you focus that effort in the right spot, which is the persistence, the attention, and the intention you're bringing to the breath. As long as these are consistent, you can expect results. Whether those results are fast or slow doesn't matter. What matters is that they're solid.

So, stick with it. We've got a whole hour right now to be with the breath—and don't stop with the end of the hour. Try to maintain that sense of ease and comfort, that sense of being centered inside as you bow down, get up and leave, go back to your meditation spot, and continue meditating until it's time to go to bed. When you wake up tomorrow morning, try to be right here again, right here at the breath.

This consistency is what makes all the difference.