

Levels of the Breath

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We all bring our stories to the meditation. Sometimes they're helpful stories, sometimes they're not. Even the Buddha brought his stories to the meditation. That first knowledge on the night of his awakening was basically his story stretching back over many lifetimes. The big issues in each lifetime were his name, his appearance, his food, his experience of pleasure and pain, and how he passed away. That's pretty much it. The life of living beings: name, appearance, food, pleasure, pain, death. Not much of a story. And yet we can elaborate these things into all kinds of issues and spend whole lives going over the details, certain incidents in the stories, especially the painful ones. Or we can look back on the pleasures we once had but that we're missing now, which can turn those past pleasures into present pain.

The Buddha found two ways to get out of his stories. One was to generalize, to think about all living beings as a whole: That was his second knowledge. The question arose: If he had previous lifetimes, how about other beings? Maybe looking at other beings, he would begin to see some general patterns. And that's precisely what happened. He saw how all beings died and then were reborn, and in taking the larger view he saw an important pattern: The quality of their rebirth was based on their actions, on the quality of their intentions, shaped by their views. From there he went to the third knowledge, which took the pattern he saw in the second knowledge and applied it to the present moment: looking at his views and his intentions in the present moment, taking them apart. That was how he got out of his stories altogether.

So as we meditate, we want to think about the pattern the Buddha found. We've got to get out of our narratives, our stories. Otherwise they drive us crazy. You go through the same old movies over and over again—movies that, if they were put up on the screen, you wouldn't pay to watch. Yet because of the "I" and the "me"—*my* pain, *my* pleasure, *my* appearance, *my* food—you get hooked into watching them over and over again. If you want your meditation to go anywhere, you've got to get yourself off the hook.

The first step is to start generalizing. Think of all the beings in the world who had appearances they didn't like, or food they didn't like, or missed the food that they once had that they *did* like, or suffered both pleasure and pain. You're not the only one. Think about that often. These are situations we all undergo. And the particulars of our appearance and food and pain and pleasure may enthrall us, but you've got to look at the general pattern. When you do, you find that the comings and goings of good and bad, likes and dislikes, start seeming inconsequential. As the general pattern takes the sting or the allure out of your own personal narrative, you can come to the present moment and see more clearly what you're doing in the present moment that's creating pain that doesn't have to be there.

What do you have in the present moment? You've got intentions, or in other words, fabrications. What kind of fabrications do you have here? You've got the breath; that's the bodily fabrication. You've got directed thought and evaluation;

those are verbal fabrications. And you've got feelings and perceptions and the intentional element fashioning them; that's mental fabrication. These are the things you want to understand.

You understand them by learning how to master them, bringing them all together—as we're doing right now when we focus on the breath—and approaching their fabrication as a skill. What's the most skillful way to breathe? What's the most skillful way to think about and evaluate your breath? What are the most skillful perceptions to apply to the breath? What kinds of feelings are useful to develop out of the breath?

As you get more and more absorbed in these questions, they really help you get out of your narratives. During my first year as a monk back in Thailand I had a lot of time by myself, a lot more than you do here. And sure enough, a lot of my old narratives from grade school, high school, college, and my family, kept coming back, coming back, coming back. The one thing that kept me from going crazy was the fact that I had something interesting to explore in the present moment: the breath. As I got more of a handle on the breath, got more absorbed in the breath, the fascination with the old narratives began to wane. The understanding began to arise that if I really wanted to comprehend why I was suffering from those old past narratives, I should try to see how I was causing suffering for myself right now in the present moment. The breath was a good way to explore that. Getting absorbed in the breath is a very important way of getting out of those narratives and into the really big issue: Why are you causing stress and suffering for yourself right now? You're not a passive observer. You're not here watching a TV show that somebody else has pre-packaged. You're actively creating the show. It's an interactive game.

So it's important to look at how you think about the breath, how you perceive the breath, and to see the impact those thoughts and perceptions have. This is where Ajaan Lee's instructions on the different levels of breath energy are really helpful. There's the in-and-out breathing. Then there's the breath energy that courses through the nerves and the blood vessels throughout the body. Then there's the still breath. It's important to realize that all three levels of breath are happening all the time. What you're going to notice depends on which one you focus on; and which one you focus on is going to determine how strong and steady and precise your concentration can be.

First you work with the in-and-out breath, which is the easiest to observe and can get the mind to a certain level of concentration, but the in-and-out breath can take you only so far. You're still changing from in to out, in to out, and you may have a sense that the in-breath is something very different from the out-breath. So you're watching two things. But then if you start getting more and more in touch with the process of spreading of the breath energy through the blood vessels and the nerves, that gives you something you can watch continuously with no switching from in to out, for this level of energy is always there. Your perception can become steadier.

At first it's not all that steady because you're exploring: This is directed thought and evaluation. You're exploring how the breath energy affects different parts of the body: which parts you tense up as you breathe in, which parts you squeeze as you breathe out. Then you work through those parts, section by section, clearing out the tension and trying to keep it cleared out throughout the breath cycle. Sometimes, as you get one section cleared up, a section that you just

cleared up a few minutes ago starts tensing up again. It's like the old Thai proverb about throwing live crabs into a basket. You throw one or two into the basket. Then you look for your third, but by the time you throw the third one in, the first crab's crawled out.

So again, this stage of the meditation is fairly active. There's a lot of directed thought, a lot of evaluation, and they have to go back and forth over the same territory many, many times. But the important point is that you're consistently *with* issues of the breath. That's what enables you to be in a state of concentration. Even though there's some activity, even though there's some moving around, it's within a prescribed area. You've withdrawn from unskillful qualities, withdrawn from sensual passions, and you're right here with all the complexities of the breath energy in the body. As you work through the complexities, things begin to hook up, and after a while they stay hooked up: connected into a single field of energy.

That's when the perception of breath can get more unified. As it grows more unified, the issues are less complex. You're concerned less and less with the in-and-out breathing, and more and more with the state of the breath energy flowing through the body. You may notice that the breath channels in the body seem to expand as you breathe in. They may seem to contract as you breathe out. This is where you've got to make up your mind to keep them open all the time, both with the in-breath and with the out—so that it's just open, open, open: open breath channels open all the time. That can be your one perception. You don't have to think about "in" and "out." Just "everything open, everything open." By this time you should have noticed where the different nodes of breath energy are, the ones that are like road intersections that can get closed off. You can close off the whole road just by closing off the one intersection. But at the same time, once you've got the intersection opened you've got the whole road open. So focus your attention on the intersections and try to keep them open all the time.

That's what Ajaan Lee is pointing to when he talks about the resting spots of the breath. Say you're focused in the middle of the chest. Keep that sense of the middle of the chest wide open all the way through the in-breath, all the way through the out, and then think of that sense of openness spreading throughout the body, wherever it's going to go. Get in touch with the awareness that already fills the body as well, so you're thinking, "all the way open, all the way in, all the way out," and the in and out become less and less and less important while the openness that's continuous takes center stage.

With that perception you can get the mind to a much more solid level of concentration. Just maintain that one perception. There will still be some in-and-out breathing, but it grows more and more subtle, and impinges less and less on your awareness. This is how you can get more in touch with that sense of the really still breath that's not affected by any in or out at all. No sense of motion at all. Just there, filling the body.

So this element of perception, this mental fabrication, has a really important role in how you relate to the present moment. As you learn to fabricate in more subtle ways, more solid ways, more unchanging and unified ways, the mind can settle down more and more solidly, securely. Some people, when they get to this stage, think that the mind isn't doing anything at all: no self, no actor, nothing. But actually it's doing just one consistent thing. When there's that one consistent thing, you don't notice the motions. The sense of the actor gets less and less

prominent in the mind because there's no changing of roles, nothing to thwart your role. There's just a sense of being, just being here. But being here is still an activity; it's still a fabrication. Nevertheless, it's a skillful fabrication. It's part of your path.

This is how you begin to understand fabrications: by mastering the fabrications that give you a sense of ease and wellbeing in the present moment, that allow the mind to settle down. Once it's settled down, it can see the subtleties a lot more clearly. So work on getting the mind in the right position, right here, right now. At this point, your stories and narratives are far away because you've got something really fascinating in the present moment. You see it. You approach the present moment with the right skills, and they really do make a huge difference in the amount of pleasure you get out of it. And that's an important insight right there.