

# Nurturing Your Inner Adult

September 10, 2013

When you start to meditate, make a quick survey of the body. See which of your joints are tense or tight, which of the muscles are tense or tight. Ask yourself, can you consciously relax them? Go down the arms. Then start at the back of the neck, go down the back, through the legs and feet. Start at the throat and go down the front of the torso. Or you can start in the hands and the feet and work up—whichever way of surveying things makes it easiest to relax. And try to relax into an erect posture.

Then as you breathe in and breathe out, try to keep that sense of relaxation going. Sometimes, when you're consciously breathing, you tend to tense up certain parts of the body to get the breath in, to push the breath out, and those patterns of tension get unpleasant after a while. They constrict the flow of the breath energy. So, think of everything being wide open. The energy can flow freely, and you just sit in the middle of this very pleasant energy field.

The edges don't have to be too clearly defined. In fact, sometimes you'll notice, as you're sitting here, that you can sense not only the energy in the body but the energy immediately around the body—an energy cocoon. You can begin to sense whether the energy surrounding your body is flowing freely or not. If it's not, just hold a picture in mind that heals the wounds in your energy field. You can take this as your foundation. It's an interesting and very pleasant foundation because there's the sense that you're floating here. Sometimes the body can get very light, but the quality of the mind is solid. And your awareness can go deep down into the body.

Having this as your foundation is very useful because it changes the balance of power in your mind. All too often when greed, aversion, delusion, fear, jealousy, any unpleasant or unskillful emotion comes into the mind, the way you breathe is going to change. In fact, the strength of the emotion is very frequently directly related to the extent to which that particular emotion has hijacked your breath energy. This is why, when you try to reason with that particular emotion, it's not going to listen to reason. You can have all your good reasons lined up and there's still a very strong sense that the power of the emotion is not going to listen, it's not going to be affected. That's because it has the power of the breath behind it.

One of the most effective ways of changing that balance of power is to be consciously aware of how you're breathing and to consciously smooth out, sort through, untangle any patterns of tension that would come up with the emotion. That way you can reclaim the breath, you can reclaim the power of the breath, so that it's on the side of the more alert, wiser, more mature members of your inner committee.

So if an emotion like fear or anxiety comes up, your first reaction should be: How is the breath?

Now, fear is not always an unskillful emotion. I've had many psychotherapists talk to me about this. They're curious about the fact that when the Buddha lists the roots of unskillful behavior, there's greed, aversion, delusion—or passion, aversion, and delusion. But where's the fear? For so many of them, fear is the unskillful emotion. Well, that's not necessarily the case. Actually, there are some good things to be afraid of. Be afraid that you're going to do things unskillfully. Be afraid you're going to act in harmful ways. Be afraid of wasting your time—the time that could be devoted to developing the mind. Those kinds of fears come under what the Buddha calls *ottappa*: compunction or fear of wrong-doing.

There's also the fear that comes with heedfulness: realizing that there are dangers out there and dangers in your own mind, and you've got to do something about them.

So fear isn't always unskillful. It's when the fear gets mixed up with greed, aversion, or delusion: That's when you've got a problem.

So first sort things out. Breathe through any of the patterns of tension that may come up with the fear, so you can weaken the sense that the fear is you or yours, or that it's telling

you some deep message from your inner self. Change the way you breathe and you can undercut a lot of those misunderstandings.

As you stay with the more refreshing breath, more energizing or nourishing breath, try to get your inner adult involved. There's so much said about getting in touch with your inner child. I have a friend, a psychotherapist, who says the only people who have the right to talk about their inner child are pregnant women. We all have inner children, and they're all as misinformed as most children. The younger they are, the less reliable their perception of things. And yet we carry quite a few of them around. You want to bring your inner adult in to talk to those children—the inner adult who has a wider perspective, a perspective that's more mature.

To do this, back the inner adult up with good breath energy—refreshing, nourishing breath energy. Then you can sort things out: “Okay, what kind of fear is this? Where is the skillful element in the fear? Where is the unskillful element? What unreasonable voices do I have to talk to? How can I change your perception of the situation?”

Remember those three types of fabrication. There's the breath, which is bodily fabrication; directed thought and evaluation—in other words, the way you talk to yourself about an issue—are verbal fabrications; and then there are perceptions and feelings, which are mental fabrications. Feelings here are not so much emotions. They're more feeling tones: pleasure, pain, neither-pleasure-nor-pain. Perceptions are the images that underlie the thoughts—the basic concepts, words, or images that you then turn into sentences, which then become verbal fabrication.

So when an emotion comes up, ask yourself, what's fabricating here? In particular, what kinds of perceptions are making it difficult to see the situation clearly? Often these fabrications and perceptions come from way back in your past. Some of the childish members on your committee have held onto these perceptions for a very long time. And one of the reasons they're so effective in holding on is that they keep these images in the shadows, so that they just flit past, like the subliminal messages that are broadcast on TV. They're there, but you're just barely aware of them. Yet they have their power precisely because you're just barely aware. They speak to a different part of the mind: the lizard brain, the part whose emotions are really raw.

If you find that you can't catch hold of what the perception is, try inserting alternative perceptions and see how the mind reacts. Try skillful perceptions. If the mind says, “I can't stand this, I can't take this, I'm afraid I'm going to die,” well, are you really going to die from whatever that may be? Can you take it, can you stand it? You've put up with all kinds of things throughout life and survived. One of the most powerful elements of fear is your unwillingness to think of what you can do. You don't even want to think of the situation. But if you actually sit down and think about it patiently, step by step, you realize you can handle it. You might have to muddle through, and things might get difficult, but you can handle it. As you're thinking about this, it's helpful to have the breath coming in, going out really comfortably.

So learn how to use the breath, reclaim your breath. Get in touch with your inner adult and fortify the inner adult with what you now know about the breathing. That'll change the balance of power in the mind.

This morning we were talking about the faculties that the Buddha teaches: the faculties of conviction, persistence, mindfulness, concentration, and discernment. The word for faculty, *indriya*, is related to Indra, the king of the gods, the dominant deva. The implication is that you want these faculties to be dominant in your mind, you want them to have power. They're your inner adults.

So you use the breath to put them on top, to keep them in charge, so you can have a good perspective on things. They'll help you gain a mature sense of which of your fears are really worth acting on and which ones are just totally irrational. That way, with a healthier inner committee like this, you find you can function a lot more effectively and cause a lot less suffering for yourself and the people around you.