

## Breath Meditation: The Second Tetrad

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We live in a world where things are always changing. Sometimes the changes are minor and almost imperceptible. Other times they can be very drastic and sudden. So we look for a refuge, a place that's safe from all the changes that would alter our lives too drastically. We look at our minds for refuge, but what do we see? As the Buddha said, the mind is so quick to change that there's nothing you can compare it to. It's quicker than anything else. So we've got to do something about that, because otherwise we have no refuge at all.

This is where it's good to look at the Buddha's second tetrad in his breath meditation instructions. You focus on the breath. As he said, the fact that you are paying careful attention to the breath: That, in and of itself, is a feeling. It's a strange statement, that an act of attention would be a feeling. I think what he's referring to is the fact that feelings are fabricated. They come from some potentials from the past: the fact that you have this body in this condition right now, this mind in this condition right now. It comes from a lot of things you've done in the past.

But those things from the past are just potentials. What you intend to do right now can decide which potentials you're going to focus on. These present intentions play a very large role in determining which actions in the past really will have an impact on the present moment. It's almost as if you could go back and change things from the past—or at least you change the effect they have. You want to take advantage of that. Ask yourself: What kind of feeling are you fostering in the way that you're being attentive? In this way, the fact that you're paying careful attention to the breath moves you into the area of feelings as a frame of reference, which is the territory of the second tetrad.

The Buddha's second tetrad has four steps. The first is to determine that you're going to breathe in and out with a feeling of rapture. In other words, breathe in a way that gives energy and gives a sense of fullness to the body. And from there, the mind will pick up a sense of fullness as well.

When the Buddha talks about developing rapture, he says that there are potentials in the body for rapture; paying appropriate attention to them is what gives rise to rapture. He doesn't tell you much about what those potentials are. He just signals the fact that they're there.

So where are those potentials? What are those potentials and how do you pay appropriate attention to them? One way you might try to approach this question is to think about some part of the body that's not central to the torso—something, say, out in your hands and your feet—so that you're as far away as possible from the movement of the breathing. Try to relax your hands and your feet as much as possible. If you feel any sense of change in the amount of tension, no matter however subtle it might be in the hands or the feet as you breathe in and breathe out, relax that tension. Relax it. Relax it so that there's no difference between the sensation there when you're breathing in and the sensation there when you're breathing out. Allow it to stay that way. Don't let anything interfere with it. If you can maintain that attention, then you find that there'll be a sense of fullness in those parts of the body. The blood flows into those parts of the body, and there's a fullness that comes with that. See if you can maintain that. And once it's there, see if you can allow it to spread.

If you're focusing on your hands, allow it to spread up the arms. If you're focusing on your feet, of course, allow it to spread up the legs. Let the breath find whatever rhythm allows that sense of fullness to spread up from those parts.

Other people find that a sense of fullness starts in the middle of the chest. Again, allow that part to feel open and relaxed with as little disturbance as possible from the breathing. Once that feels comfortable, then allow that sense of comfort to spread. If it doesn't feel comfortable, then go back to the hands and the feet.

What you're doing is taking a potential and developing it. It may not seem like much to begin with, just the fact that your hands are relaxed. But you protect it. Ajaan Fuang would

use the word *prakhawng*, which is the word they use in Thailand for when a child is learning to walk and you're walking behind the child. You're not grabbing onto the child, because you want the child to walk on its own. But at the same time, your hands are a few inches away so that in case the child trips, you can catch it right away. You want to have that same hovering-around kind of attitude toward your sense of well-being.

After a while, the fullness may get to seem a little bit much, so the next step is to breathe in and out sensitive to pleasure. And it's a similar sort of thing. Find the areas of the body that feel good as you breathe in, feel good as you breathe out, and see if you can let that sense of feeling good spread. It's different from rapture simply in the sense that it's not quite so full. It's not the same energetic quality. It's cooler, more peaceful.

As you can maintain this, you begin to realize that these feelings begin to have an impact on the mind: the feeling of ease, the feeling of fullness. You want to take note of that fact. This is what the Buddha calls *citta-sankhara*: mental fabrication. These feelings have a direct impact on shaping the mind. Other things also are coming into play here: your perceptions. As you're focusing on the hands, as you're protecting that sense of well-being, as you're protecting the sense of ease that goes through the body, you have to hold certain perceptions in mind. These are images or words you hold in mind for recognizing things. They're not full sentences. They're just basic concepts or little pictures by which the mind communicates with itself and communicates with the body. Those perceptions will have an impact on both body and mind. They're mental fabrication as well.

Look into your perception of the breathing: Is it getting in the way of your concentration? Is it helping it? If you have a perception that the breath has to struggle in order to get in, that's not a helpful perception. If we picture to ourselves that we only have two little holes—i.e., the nostrils—for the breath to come in and out of the body, what happens when they get plugged up? Even if they're not plugged up, it's an awfully tiny spot for the breath to come in and saturate the whole body.

This is when you want to hold to the perception of the whole body breathing. Think of it breathing even through the pores. That will change the way you sense the breathing. It'll make it a lot easier for the mind to settle down and drop the impulse to push the breath here or pull it there. With the right perception in mind, then when you breathe in, it comes in everywhere easily. Hold onto the perception that the breath is just waiting to come in, and it's just a matter of your allowing it. Won't you allow it? You don't have to do any pulling.

Another good perception to hold in mind is that, as soon as you're aware that the breath is coming in, a subtle breath has already coursed throughout the whole body. If you can hold that perception in mind long enough, you'll see that it really is true. Some people might say that the perception itself is creating that sensation of the breath, but when you use it, you'll see how real it feels and how it's helping you to settle down. So it's a useful perception. Who cares what the scientists, looking from the outside, say about your breath? What you're doing is to investigate how feelings and perceptions shape your mind from the inside.

Then the final step in this tetrad is, as the Buddha said, to allow this process of fabrication, or shaping, to grow calm. In other words, you see which feelings and which perceptions give rise to one level of concentration and then you change those feelings, change the perceptions, to see if it takes you to a deeper level. In technical terms, this can take you all the way to the highest of the formless *jhanas*. The question might be, "Well, at the fourth *jhana*, the breath is stopped, so how are you talking about breath meditation on that level and beyond?" I think that what the Buddha is referring to here is that when you're moving from one *jhana* to another, there has to be a moment, at least, of evaluation. At that moment, there will be some breathing.

You evaluate: "If this perception is too gross, I want to have a more subtle one." The perception of having a form of the body is grosser than the perception of perceiving the body as just a mist of sensations. The perception of the space between that mist is a more subtle perception still. The perception of the awareness of that space: that's even more subtle, more calming than the perception of space. Letting go of the perception of the mind

being one with its object: that's even more calming. You finally get to the point where you know where you are, but you don't have any label for it. That's even more calming.

You can pursue this. It takes time. You want to be able to develop the stages. I was reading just now a book on developing jhana in which the author says to stay in a particular jhana for at least five minutes, which is a ridiculously small amount of time.

Once you've got this perception, then you can try to maintain it even when you leave the meditation. Say you've got a perception of space: See if you can maintain that perception as you go through the day. You may not be in jhana, but it's good to hold onto that perception as much as you can. It'll change the way you relate to things. Just think about everything you see as permeated by space. After all, every atom has more space than it has matter. Think of all the space going through your body, through everybody you deal with, everyplace you go, everything you see. And you find that that perception has a really good impact on the mind. This knowledge of perception and feeling and the role they play in shaping the mind is one of the lessons that'll be most useful in learning how to make your mind more reliable.

If you learn how to focus on the breath in a way that gives rise to a sense of ease and rapture, and learn how to access that whenever you need it, your mind will be a lot less irritable. It'll be a lot less likely to regard any incident as just too much to take, where it suddenly snaps and its goodness disappears—its calm, its equanimity, its patience all disappear. If those things can disappear, you're really up the creek. You don't know what your mind is going to do.

But if you learn how to feed it well with good feelings and good perceptions, you'll come to find out which perceptions can help you get through tough situations, the sorts of situations where it's just one long grind. How can you stand up to that sort of thing without letting it grind you down? Can you learn how to perceive things in a way that you're outside them, where they can't reach you? When you learn these skills, then no matter how bad things get outside, you've got something inside that's more reliable, that's yours, a sense of well-being inside that nothing outside can touch. Hold that perception in mind.

The Buddha, when he was teaching meditation to Rahula, taught him as the very first step: Make your mind in tune with the earth. He was teaching Rahula to hold a perception in mind. Just as earth can stand anything that's thrown on the earth, doesn't shrink away from disgusting things, in the same way, you're going to be dealing with things that are unpleasant but you don't have to shrink away. Hold that perception in mind: Your mind is like earth. You'll find that your patience grows a lot stronger, a lot more reliable, a lot more resilient.

So you've got feelings that you could create simply by paying attention to the breath—and in particular, learning how to pay attention with the right touch. You learn the role of perception in either weakening or strengthening the mind. You don't want a weak mind, so you work on the perceptions that strengthen it. This way you find that you can develop your inner mainstay.

As the Buddha says, the self is its own mainstay. But if the self isn't reliable, that means you have no mainstay at all. If your mind is constantly changing, so quick to change that nothing else can be compared to it, you're really in bad shape. But if you learn that you can use perceptions and feelings to shape the mind—and the way you relate to your breath has a large role to play in this because it gives you a place to stand as you watch this happening—you've got that good breath energy you can draw on to develop the kinds of feelings you need. You find that you can develop a lot more patience, a lot more endurance. The mind can be on a more even keel and much less likely to tip over because you're getting more and more skilled at the things that shape the mind, that keep it in balance. And you can use that skill to a lot of good ends.