

# Breath Meditation: The Fourth Tetrad

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The Buddha's meditation instructions come in four sets of four, called four tetrads, sixteen steps in all. When people are just getting started, they tend to ignore the last tetrad because they figure that it's just for advanced practitioners. But actually, all the tetrads take place simultaneously. Take the tetrads dealing with the body, with feelings, and with mind states: It's not the case that you first work with the body and then, when that's all taken care of, you work with feelings, and then, when they're taken care of, you work with mind states. You've got to deal with all three simultaneously from the very beginning. You're sitting here breathing and a pain comes up in the body. You've got to deal with the pain effectively or else you won't be able to stay with the breathing. Or a distraction comes up in the mind. You've got to deal with the distraction. You can't wait until you're finished dealing with the breath.

And that fourth tetrad is also there for you to use. It basically gives you instructions on how to deal with obstructions. The four steps are these: You breathe in and out paying attention to inconstancy. You breathe in and out paying attention to dispassion. You breathe in and out paying attention to cessation. Then you breathe in and out paying attention to relinquishment.

Now, you can interpret those steps as applying to a very advanced level of the practice, and they do. But it's also useful to apply them as you're just getting started. You run into an obstacle, like a pain in the leg. Remember that the pain is inconstant. It's not there all the time. It comes and goes. And if you find that the pain is blocking your breath, you have to ask yourself, "What am I doing that's making it block the breath? What image do I have in mind that's getting in the way of the breath flowing smoothly there?" You have to see that image, too, as inconstant. Maybe it's not really true. Try holding another image in mind.

Remember that the breath can go through anything. The atoms in your leg, the ones that you say are pained, are mostly space. So think of the breath going through that space. At the very least, if it doesn't make the pain go away, it releases a lot of the tension around the pain. It makes it a lot easier to settle in because, as the Buddha says in those instructions for feelings, "You try to breathe in a way that gives rise to rapture, and you try to breathe in a way that gives rises to pleasure."

So if the pains are getting in the way of the rapture and pleasure, you've got to do something about them. And this is one of the ways of dealing with them, seeing that they're not really as solid or impenetrable or lasting as you might have thought. Even if you have a chronic pain, it comes and goes.

And don't think of the pain as a solid wall. Think of it as something porous. In this way, focusing on the inconstancy of the pain—and the inconstancy of the images that get in the way, that make the pain worse than it has to be, more of an obstruction than it has to be—will allow you to develop some dispassion for your old ways of seeing things. Then, with dispassion, the obstruction those images create can cease.

This is really useful in the meditation because we tend to bring our preconceptions into the meditation, as to what's possible, what's impossible. As when we talk about breath energy flowing in the body: Until you develop some dispassion for your old ways of perceiving the body that would get in the way of sensing the breath flow, you're putting a major obstacle in your path.

The same with obstructive mind states. When a hindrance comes up, the Buddha says in the section dealing with the mind that you should try to gladden the mind, steady the mind, and release the mind. In gladdening the mind, what kind of obstruction is getting in the way of your feeling glad about the fact you're here? Is doubt getting in the way? Is restlessness-and-anxiety getting in the way? Is sleepiness getting in the way? Okay, what do you do to counteract those mind states?

First, you have to see them as impermanent, inconstant. As with sleepiness: All too often when the symptoms of drowsiness come over us, we say, "That's it. Time to stop.

Sleepiness has set in and it won't go away until I take a nap." So you have to ask yourself, "Are they really signs that you're drowsy or is this just the mind's way of playing tricks on itself?" Try to find a spot in the body that's not being affected by the signs of drowsiness and then look back at those signs. You see that they come and they go. They may be going around the eyes, like a little fog going through your brain, and if you're the kind of person who likes to sleep a lot, you've learned how to maximize those sensations to make them more powerful than they really are. So you have to step back and say, "Okay just look at this"—because this is a lot of what the fourth tetrad is: Just looking at things for a while and then seeing that they're not as powerful or as constant or as overwhelming as you might have thought. The signs of drowsiness come and go, so when they're gone, make the most of that fact.

The same with restlessness-and-anxiety—the thoughts that pull you away from the present moment, telling you you've got to worry about something else. Well, they too are inconstant. How reliable are they? You might tell yourself, "I've really got to plan for this. I've got to worry about that and I've got to make arrangements so that this doesn't happen or that doesn't happen." You have to remind yourself that you don't really know what's going to happen in the future. It's very unpredictable. What you do know is that you're going to need lots of mindfulness, lots of alertness, lots of concentration, lots of discernment, whatever happens. And where are you going to get those qualities? By developing the mind right now. So, to take care of any eventuality in the future, you're working on your meditation. That's your best way of preparing for future certainties and uncertainties. This allows you to develop some dispassion for those restless thoughts, those thoughts of anxiety. You've seen their allure, but you've also seen their drawbacks. And when you see that the drawbacks outweigh the allure, you can develop dispassion for them. When you're not feeling any passion for them, they cease. Then you can let the whole issue go—the thoughts that disturbed you, and the fact that you were able to get past them. You don't have to hang onto your success. You let it go, too, and get back to business. That's what's meant by relinquishment. And that covers all four steps in the fourth tetrad right there.

So when you find that there's an obstruction in your meditation—dealing either with the breath or with feelings or with mind states—keep these four steps in mind. First, look at the fact that no matter how insistent or powerful or convincing the breath obstruction or mind state, it's inconstant. The same with a feeling: A pain may have been there for a long time, but it doesn't have to be there always. And even if it is a long-lasting pain, you can learn to look at it as inconstant—coming and going, coming and going, little moments of pain.

An image I've found useful is that you're sitting in the back, say, of a bus or an old station wagon, facing backwards, and as you go down the street, things that come into the range of your vision come in from the side and then immediately go away from you. It's the opposite of when you're sitting in the front, and things coming into your range of vision seem to be coming right at you. Well, think of the pain, those moments of pain, as going away from you as soon as they come into your range of vision, rather than as coming right at you. That changes your relationship to them, and you begin to see them as a lot less lasting and threatening. They come and they're gone. They come and they're gone. So you can breathe around them.

You can also make your awareness go around them so that you don't have to focus so intently on them. Because often that's our problem: We focus on these things so intently that we strengthen them, we solidify them. Our concern with trying to control them turns them into greater obstacles than they have to be. The solution is to see them as little bits and pieces: moments of pain that don't need to be controlled, because they're already passing away.

This applies not only to pain, but also to anger. Anger sometimes seems to be very long and lasting. But actually it has its moments and then it goes. Then we dig it up again. And it goes again. And then we dig it up again. It goes again. The problem is not the moments of anger. It's the digging it up again. Who's doing that? Well, we're the ones who're doing that.

We have a passion for digging up our anger, just as we have a passion for digging up lust, digging up greed, whatever our standard problems are. Once there's a moment of anger, you don't have to say, "Here it is to stay," and latch onto it. Instead, you want to see, "Here, it's come, but it's going to go. I don't have to get caught up in it." Our problem is that the symptoms of anger or whatever hang on in the body, and so we interpret them as signs that the anger is still there. But what's there is just the after-effect. If you can see these things as not as solid as they seem to be, not as powerful as they seem to be, that puts you in a better position to develop some dispassion toward them. The passion is actually the problem. Once you can develop the dispassion, then these things cease. You let go and you move on.

Now, while you're working on your concentration, you don't want to view it as inconstant quite yet. As Ajaan Lee would recommend, try to develop concentration in spite of the perceptions of inconstancy, stress, and not-self. In other words, you're trying to make this state of mind as constant as possible, as easeful as possible, and as much under your control as possible. That puts you in a better position to fight off a lot of your grosser obstacles.

So the concentration and the ability to fight these things off go together. In other words, you have to fight them off to get the mind concentrated, and the better your concentration gets, the more useful it is in fighting them off. The stronger your concentration, the more constant it becomes. That makes it easier to see the subtle inconstancy of other things. You've got a point of comparison. You see the pleasure that concentration offers and you compare it to the pleasure that these other things—these other feelings and mind states—seem to offer. You realize that what they offer is not that much at all. What you've got here with the concentration is a lot more reliable. Your sense of well-being goes a lot deeper. So, again, you've got a point of comparison. And when it's under your control, you can see how little control you have over these other things. You realize that they're not worth it at all, not worth getting involved with. You can let them go.

It's only at the very end of the practice that you turn the steps of this last tetrad onto the concentration itself, seeing that it, too, has its inconstancy—and you've developed a passion for it. You really do have to develop a passion for the concentration in order to do it well. I was reading a book recently where the author was saying that you don't have to analyze jhana because nobody's really stuck on jhana. But this author was teaching a five-, seven-, ten-minute jhana. There's nothing much there, so there's nothing much there to get stuck on. But if you're using the concentration as your tool for peeling away other things, you've got to learn to rely on it. If you can't rely on it, you're not going to be able to peel these things away. So you've got to get attached to the concentration to let these other things go.

Ultimately, as other things lose their appeal, the concentration itself becomes your main remaining attachment. When you've reached that point, you can start turning the analysis of inconstancy onto the concentration so that even this—no matter how much you've liked it, no matter how much you've learned to depend on it—has reached the point where the time has come to let it go. You can develop dispassion for it because you see that it, too, has stress. It, too, is not totally under your control. If you try to find a really reliable happiness, you can't stay here. But everywhere else you move, you realize that that would be just another state of concentration. So what do you do? You can't stay and you can't move. Well, there's another alternative. And if you're really perceptive, you'll see what that other alternative is: Let both the staying and the moving drop away. That's when you let go of everything. Everything gets relinquished—even the path—as it ceases and falls away.

That's the kind of insight we're ultimately aiming at. And you get there by learning how to use the tools of this fourth tetrad from very early on, even as you're just settling down with the breath. Is there a pain in the way of getting the breath smoothly through the body? Okay, learn to see it as inconstant. See what perceptions you're holding onto that are maintaining the pain, strengthening the pain. Learn to see them as inconstant, too, so that you can feel some dispassion for them. Then they'll cease, and you can let the whole issue go. You'll realize that what's left doesn't provide an obstacle to the breath. It allows the

breath to flow smoothly through the body so that you can gain a sense of rapture. You tune out of the pain and into the rapture.

The same with any mind state that comes up—things that are more depressing; things that are more disturbing: See them as just coming and going. See also that you've got something here that underlies them, that's more lasting: the sense of the breath staying there all the time. That's actually a lot more solid than the coming and going of a thought. That allows you to feel some dispassion for the thought, and to let it go as it falls away, as it will fall away. This allows you to let go of the whole issue so you're not digging it up again.

So this last tetrad is useful all the way through the practice. Keep it in mind as you're sitting here. It's a very useful tool from the very beginning to the very end.