

Between You and Your Eyes

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The Buddha's teachings are primarily about things that are immediately present to our awareness—the feeling of the breath, the movements of the body, thoughts moving in the mind: things immediately present, but things that we tend to miss, things we're pretty ignorant about. When we suffer, we think we know suffering, but we don't really. When we have a desire, we think we know our desires, but we don't really. Our attention is mainly focused someplace else—on our plans for the future, issues from the past—so that what's immediately present is simply used as a means to something else. As a result, the important issues in life—the things that are immediately present to our awareness, the things we're doing right now—we don't really comprehend. Even something as simple as the breath: The Buddha says that when you breathe in ignorance, the breath is a cause for suffering. Here it is, the basic force of your life, what keeps you alive, and you hardly know it.

What does really good breathing feel like? It takes time to stop and look, to put aside your plans of where you want it to take you. Simply look at the process in and of itself. And the Buddha's guidelines for looking are important to know, too. It's not simply a matter of being equanimous. Equanimity actually comes pretty far down the path.

I don't know how many times I've heard people say about meditation, "Well, get the mind to be still and then start looking for the three characteristics." That's skipping over a huge area of practice, which is based on the four noble truths. Look for where there is stress. Try to comprehend it. Comprehending means knowing it so thoroughly that when you see that the things that you used to think were pleasurable really are stressful, you're willing to develop dispassion toward them. Only when you're totally dispassionate toward stress do you really comprehend it.

And there's craving, the second noble truth. You don't just sit there and watch craving arise and pass away until the point where you're okay with it. You have to really let it go. Only when it's totally abandoned do you really know it.

Then there's the path. The path is something you develop. And the main factor of the path is right concentration. You want to be able to focus on the object of your meditation in a way that induces a sense of pleasure or ease, along with refreshment or rapture. Those are things you try to develop. It's only when you fully develop them that you know the path. It's only then that you've really gotten to know the breath as an element of the path.

So focus on your breath. Even though it's, something really close to us, we usually breathe in ignorance. So let's breathe with awareness right now, and specifically the awareness meant to try to develop a sense of ease and well-being along with the breath. You don't want to go to equanimity until you've got some basic skills in how to use the breath as a source of pleasure. This involves getting acquainted with your sense of the body sitting here in the present moment.

Again, this is something else we tend to be ignorant of. We use the body for various things. Not only when we move the body: It's also through the body that we can keep thoughts in mind, by using the little physical markers of tension in different spots of the body to keep a thought here long enough so that we can examine it and develop it. This means that we tend to know the body as the playground of our thoughts. And so our awareness of the breath and other things that would distract our thoughts get pushed back into the background. When the thoughts are gone, and you are just here sitting with the body, at first it seems all pretty numb and neutral. So you've got to reacquaint yourself with this area of your awareness.

It's not far away. This is one of Ajaan Mun's frequent teachings. He says you've got the raw materials right here for awakening. It's nothing far away. You don't have to borrow it from anybody. He was teaching a lot of people who were poor, on the fringes of society, who were used to being looked down upon. But he told them, No, you've got everything you need for full awakening right here. Just learn how to make use of it.

So try to get to know your arms, your legs, your torso, your back, your neck, the way your head feels simply as a head, the muscles around your eyes, the muscles in your neck, the muscles around your jaws. How do they feel when you breathe in? How do they feel when you breathe out? Can you tell when they feel relatively pleasant or relatively strained? How is the blood flowing? Can you feel where the blood is flowing? Where it's blocked? If there's an area where the blood is flowing, can you make sure that it stays wide open and unobstructed all the way through the in-breath, all the way through the out? If there's a pain in the body, how do you breathe around that? Do you tense up around the pain? Do you try to block the pain and also block the breath at the same time? Can you open things up?

Now, these may be too many questions to handle all at once if you want to get to know just one part of the body. Maybe a whole hour isn't enough. A good place to start might be your hands. Consciously go through and relax every muscle you can imagine in your hand. Think of the bones inside the hand, relaxing around the bones all the way through the in-breath, all the way through the out, just keeping the hand totally relaxed all the way in, all the way out. Stay with it for a while. And ask yourself, is there any other way of breathing that would be more

comfortable for the hand? Just pose that question in your mind. See how the body reacts. Then do the same with the other hand.

You can also try this exercise with your feet. Figure out the parts of the body that determine your posture as a whole. How do they feel? Are they tense and tight? If they are, can you allow them to soften? If you can't sense any relationship between your feet and your breathing, move to a part of the body that is more closely related to the breathing process—say, the palate or the neck. Can you breathe in a way that leaves the neck relaxed all the way in, all the way out? And don't ask yourself where this is going or how quickly you're going to get results. Just be right here, and get to know how it feels right here, right now— things that are so close that you can't even say they're right before your eyes. They're between you and your eyes—right here inside.

Then you can experiment. Ask yourself, how would longer breathing feel? And allow the body to breathe with a longer breath. Again, the important word here is “allow.” Try not to put too much physical force on it. There may be a little bit; that's only to be expected, but just sit with longer breathing for a while and see how it feels. Then think, “shorter breathing,” to see what shorter breathing does. And then try to compare how the two feel.

It's only through comparing that you develop a sensitivity. This is how they train professional tasters. They give them a vocabulary and they give them two things that are very similar and have them go back and forth between the two types of food until they can detect the differences.

So it's the same with the breathing. Ajaan Lee gives you a vocabulary for thinking about breath energy in the body, the breath coming in and out of the pores. He has a lot of different categories for breathing—spots in the body where it feels like the breath is spinning around in one place, other areas where it feels like it's moving through, areas where it's still. It's all breath, different kinds of breathing. And then there's the in-and-out breath. There are lots of variations in your in-and-out breath.

So explore, experiment. It's only through exploring and experimenting that you begin to detect differences: “This is relatively more pleasant than that. This feels more refreshed than that.” Go for whatever feels more pleasant, more refreshing. Then try to maintain that. You'll find that you can't maintain it with force. You can't strangle it and say, “You're going to stay right here.” That kills it. The classic image is of holding a baby chick in your hand. If you hold it too tightly, you're going to kill it. If your grasp is too loosely, it'll fly away. Find just the right amount of pressure to put on it.

Try to be observant of these very simple things. They're so close to you that you usually overlook them. This is where the real ignorance is. It's not someplace far away. It's right at your immediate awareness—what you immediately sense, the movement of the body, the decisions in the mind. These things are just right here and yet we're always looking away from them—at where we think they're going to go, what we think they are going to accomplish, how they fit in with our plans.

You need to give yourself a new plan: the plan to get as sensitive as possible to right here, right now. And it's only through developing these qualities of right concentration that you're ever going to get to really know right here, right now. It's not something you know through passive knowing. It's more an active knowing; it's experimenting, so that you get to know the subtleties, the distinctions, of what a really concentrated mind is like, and the levels it can go through.

We practice with ardency, but it doesn't mean we're in a hurry to rush through things. "Ardency" here means you want to be as sensitive as possible to what's right here, right now, so that you can figure them out and make the best use of them. It's only that way you can use the basic building blocks of experience—the breath, directed thought, evaluation, feelings, and perceptions—so that they lead away from suffering and don't simply pile more suffering on.

So even though we are doing the meditation to gain results, you can't keep your focus on the results down the line. You've got to keep the focus right here, right now. Each breath. How you're shaping each breath right now: Be sensitive to that, so that each breath becomes your goal, in and of itself. And try to find the most delicious breath, the most comfortable breath, the most gratifying breath, not because you're going to keep it and put away in storage, but because the process of looking for these things is what clears up your ignorance.