

# *Balancing Tranquility & Insight*

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For some people, the practice of meditation involves two very different kinds of activities. One is getting the mind to be still, and the other is giving rise to insight. And for them, these are very sharply divided. In order to get the mind still, you simply just force it to stay with one thing and don't allow it to think at all. Then when it's rested, then you allow it to do some thinking. Give it a specific topic to deal with, like the 32 parts of the body, the problem of pain, whatever happens to come up in the mind as a specific problem. You analyze it and deal with it. After a while, you find that your analysis starts getting fuzzy or blunt. It's like using a sharp knife. You use it to cut things, and cut things, and cut things, and finally you find you can't cut through things anymore. That's when you've got to get the mind to stop, be still again. And the stilling is what sharpens the blade so that it's ready to come out and do some more cutting.

For other people though, the development of insight and tranquility is something that happens together. This is specifically true of the way the Buddha teaches breath meditation, because he defines tranquility as a matter of getting the mind to settle down, whereas insight is a matter of learning to see things in terms of fabrication: how they get put together, what the processes are, and how to develop a sense of dispassion toward them. And it only stands to reason that as you develop a sense of dispassion, the mind is going to get more still. And the more still you are, the more clearly you will see things in these terms, if you're looking for them in these terms. That's what breath meditation is all about.

Of the four tetrads in breath meditation, the first tetrad corresponds to the body and the second one corresponds to feelings. The third corresponds to mind, or intent—the word *citta* here can also mean intent. And then finally the dhammas or mental qualities is the fourth. In each case, you're sensitizing yourself to some aspect of fabrication. In the first tetrad, the fabrication is the in-and-out breath itself. You sensitize yourself to when the breath is short, when it's relatively long. The text only says that much, but what you're actually doing is learning how to notice how short breathing affects the body, how long breathing affects the body. On the other hand, you also become sensitive to how the state of the body affects the way you breathe.

Then the Buddha has you get sensitive to the entire body, after which he tells you to calm bodily fabrication, that's the fourth step in the tetrad. What this means is to calm the effect of the breath on the body. The breath calms down, the intentional element of the breath calms down as well. This can involve a lot of things. It can actually get to the point where the breath stops. In the course of this, you begin to gain some insight into how much intentional element there is in the breathing.

I've had a lot of people who've practiced mindfulness methods where they were told simply to let the breath do its own thing. And then they come to the Ajaan Lee method, where he actually tells him to adjust the breath, play with the breath, work to get it comfortable. At first, they resist. But after a while, as they actually try the method, they become more and more sensitive to the element of

intention in the breathing, and they begin to realize that even when they thought they were allowing the breath to do its own thing, they were actually manipulating it unconsciously. They'd been taught to overlook the extent to which they were already fabricating the breath.

So an important part of the meditation is to sensitize yourself to how much you are shaping things so that then you can actually let that process of shaping things calm down to a level you might not have imagined before. In the case of the breath, this means calming the breath to the point where all the breath energies in the body seem to connect up, and you're getting enough oxygen through the pores of your skin so you don't need to do any in and out breathing. And right there you've gained some insight into the process of fabrication at the same time that the mind is beginning to calm down. This is how tranquility and insight develop together using the body as your frame of reference.

You learn many of the same lessons in terms of feelings in the second tetrad. The Buddha starts out by telling you to be sensitive to rapture, sensitive to pleasure. And those feelings can be based on lots of different things: the sense of well-being that comes from developing virtue, developing generosity; the sense of confidence that arises from contemplating the Buddha, the Dharma and the Sangha; or recollecting on your own past virtues, your own past acts of generosity, and, as they say, the qualities of the devas that you've been developing, which include generosity and restraint. When you think about these things, you develop a sense of confidence. You're not just a weight on the world. And you're also worthy of doing this practice.

So sometimes those thoughts can give rise to a sense of pleasure that then can become the basis of concentration. Once you allow yourself to be sensitive to the pleasure and the rapture, then the Buddha tells you to be sensitive to the effect that these are having on the mind—not only the feelings, but also the perceptions that go along with them. These shape the mind. These are mental fabrications. And as you notice that, you allow them to calm down. For instance, if the rapture feels too intense, you allow it to calm down. You tune in to an area of your awareness that's more refined than the rapture.

When the pleasure seems superfluous, and you simply want to settle in and be very, very still, you get the mind to a state of equanimity. What you are doing is allowing the mental fabrication of feeling to calm down. At the same time, you allow your perceptions to calm down, and this can actually take you deeper into the formless jhanas. If you see that holding onto the perception of the shape of the body is a burden on the mind, you can drop that. You're left with space: the space inside the body, the space outside the body. It all connects. It has no boundary.

From that you become aware of the awareness of space, and that changes your perception from "space" to "knowing." The mental fabrication—the effect of the perception on the mind—gets more and more refined: just knowing, knowing, knowing. Then even the oneness of that knowing begins to seem burdensome. So you drop that. And you're left with the perception of the dimension of nothingness. You can pursue this all the way up through the formless jhanas, as you allow mental fabrication to calm down.

So what you're doing is that you're developing tranquility and insight at the same time. The mind gets more still, and as things calm down, you gain more

and more insight into this process of fabrication.

The same principle applies to the third tetrad, when you're directly aware of the mind. Again, the tetrad starts out by telling you to be sensitive to that aspect of your awareness. Here "mind" can also mean "intent," the intent you have to stay with the breath. You're clear on that. You're clear on the state of your mind, the state of your awareness. And then you see what it needs. Does it need to be gladdened? Does it need more energy? You think about things that give it gladness, like the recollections. Or by adjusting the breath, or by adjusting your perceptions of the breath, the perceptions of what you're focusing on.

Then you allow the mind to get more and more steady. What perceptions allow it to get more steady? Perception of the breath as a whole body process gets it more steady. Your perception that you're not separate from the breath, that you're not in one part of the body or inhabiting one part of the body and watching the breath in some other part of the body, but you're actually one with the breath, immersed in the breath, bathed in the breath, surrounded by breath: That perception helps steady the mind even further.

Then you check to see how you can release the mind. This begins with releasing it from thoughts of sensuality and all the other hindrances that eat away at your meditation. Once you've released it from them, you find yourself in the different levels of jhana. And you begin to release yourself from the coarser levels to the more refined ones. Or you can release yourself from the activity of intending concentration and get ultimate release. So the mind gets more and more still at the same time you're getting hands-on experience with the process of fabrication, seeing how much intention shapes your awareness, and how you can change your intentions and see how that creates different levels of gladness, steadiness, and release in your awareness. So here again, tranquility and insight go together.

The same principle applies to the fourth foundation. You start out being aware of impermanence or inconstancy. In the early stages of the meditation, this means focusing on the inconstancy of anything that would pull you away from your concentration, so that you can develop a sense of dispassion for whatever it is: all the stories we bring with us; all the concerns we bring with us that tend to pop up as we try to get the mind to settle down. We have a whole hour, and part of the mind says, "Let's think about this. "You suddenly find yourself planning next month, or regurgitating events of last month or whatever. You've got to realize that those things are impermanent, stressful, and not-self. There is really no meat there for you there, no nourishment.

As Ajaan Lee says, it's like a dog chewing on a bone. There's no meat left on the bone, so all it tastes is the taste of its own saliva. Or, he says, it's like licking the bottom of yesterday's soup pot when there's no soup left. That's thinking about the past. Or licking tomorrow's soup pot where there's no soup in it yet. That's thinking about the future. There's no nourishment there at all.

So as you learn to see the impermanence of these thoughts, it develops a sense of dispassion. And because you are feeling dispassionate for them, you are no longer involved in their creation, so they stop.

It's important to understand that relationship between dispassion and cessation. Dispassion means being dispassionate toward the activities that you're doing, the things that you're creating. Once you feel dispassion, you don't feel

the need to create them anymore and they stop. If your insight goes deep enough, you can actually end that particular activity, that particular defilement. As the Buddha says, you relinquish it. You give it back. Whatever you are laying claim to, you just give it back. Ajaan Lee's term is spitting it out. Something you've taken into your mouth and you realize you don't want it anymore, you spit it back out.

As I said at the beginning, this applies at the beginning to all the topics that would pull you away from your concentration. As your concentration begins to develop, and you get more and more sensitive, it starts applying to the concentration itself. You see the inconstancy of one level of concentration, and once you let go of whatever inconstancy you can detect in it, that takes you to a deeper level, then a deeper level, until finally you can abandon your attachment to concentration altogether. That's when the dispassion is total, the cessation is total, and the relinquishment is total. You even give up the whole path.

So in following the steps of breath meditation, you're developing concentration by developing tranquility and insight at the same time. You're getting the mind to settle down at the same time you're learning how to look at fabrications and regard fabrications in a way that gives rise to dispassion. As the Buddha said, to gain good strong concentration, to attain the jhanas, requires that you develop both tranquility and insight.

Once the concentration has gotten solid, if you want to gain total release, again, use the concentration, use the jhana as a basis for deeper tranquility and deeper insight. In this way they all go together. And as for the question of how you balance them, as Ajaan Lee says, when you're working with the breath, you find that you'll sometimes be stressing the tranquility side more, and sometimes the insight side more. But there's always some insight in your tranquility. There's always some tranquility in your insight. It's just a question of which side you're going to stress more at any one particular time, which the mind seems to need more. That involves learning how to read your mind, that third tetrad. Does it need more gladdening? Does it need more release? Does it need more steadying?

But as you get more and more sensitive in how you read your mind, read the processes of fabrication—either in terms of body, or feelings, mind, mental qualities—learning how to develop that balance, that's an important part of insight as well. You see when you need to let go of certain things, and which things you need to hang on to in the mean time. You don't want to be the sort of person who has a few moments of concentration and lets them go, saying, "Okay, I've gotten beyond concentration now." That goes nowhere. It short-circuits the whole path. You need to use fabrication to get to the end of fabrication. Seeing that is an important element of insight right there.

And as your skill develops in developing both tranquility and insight, the whole path comes together. Even for people for whom insight practice and tranquility practice are two radically separate things, they find that as the path begins to reach fruition, everything comes together. Ajaan Maha Boowa talks about how at that point, it's hard to draw a line between insight practice and tranquility practice. They both reach balance.

So you can't determine ahead of time which sort of person you're going to be, the sort with two radically separate practices, or the sort with a more integrated practice from the very beginning. But the integration is where we're all headed.

And it's a matter of learning how to read your own mind, to figure out how the balance is going to be developed. Think of those old-fashioned balances. They don't always stay in balance. Sometimes they have to swing back and forth before balance is reached. The same with the mind: Sometimes it starts out in a balanced state that it can maintain steadily, other times it swings widely from one side to the other before the balance finally settles down to its balance point. But the balance point is where we're all headed.