

Sensitize Yourself

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The breath is so close to the mind, and yet for most of us it's uncharted territory. It's like those old maps they had back in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. They'd have a cartoon version of the coastline of North America and a big, blank, white space right in the middle, with a little inscription that said, "Here be tygers," "Here be wilde beasts," or whatever. But it's pretty much unknown territory, unknown land, even though it's right next to us.

There's nothing closer to the mind than the breath, yet our focus is always on something a bit farther away. We've actually taught ourselves to ignore the breath so that we can pay attention to other things. Yet the message of meditation is that it's actually much more important to be here with the breath, because it puts you in touch with things that really are important in life.

The breath is like a mirror for the mind. Changes in the mind show up in the breath very quickly. Sometimes you may not be aware of what's going on in the mind itself, but if you're in touch with the breath then you'll know something's wrong. Say, when anger arises, there'll be a tightness in the breath, a tightness in the chest that wasn't there before. When fear arises, your heartbeat and breathing rate change. So staying in touch with the breath is an excellent way of getting yourself in touch with what's going on with the mind.

At the same time, being in touch with the breath is the best way of staying in touch with how the body's faring. If, when you're eating, you stay in touch with the breath, you get a better sense of when you've eaten too much, or not enough, or when something doesn't agree with you.

What we're doing here is learning to sensitize ourselves to a layer that we've learned to de-sensitize ourselves to so that we can pay attention to other things. Now we come back and we have to unlearn all those habits. And it takes a while.

The important thing in the meditation is to set up the right questions. Just ask yourself, "How are things going with the breath right now? When you sense the breath, exactly what are you sensing? How do you know the breath is coming in? How do you know the breath is going out?" Look into these sensations carefully because they have a lot to tell you.

The guides that are written down, like Ajaan Lee's *Seven Steps*, are just to get you started. He, himself, when he gave talks on breath meditation, would explore all sorts of other aspects of the breath that aren't mentioned in the *Seven Steps*, at least not in detail. You might explore one particular step at a time and

discover all sorts of new things in there, new implications of what the breath can do both for the body and for the mind. So there's a lot of territory to explore here. The *Seven Steps* just cover what's really basic, what's really essential.

You'll find that when the mind finally does settle down and you come out and consider, "What happened this time? Why did it settle down so much better than last time?" – if you look at the *Seven Steps*, you'll find that you had them all covered. Whether you were actively thinking about them or not is not the issue. The fact that the mind really was keeping in touch with the right center for itself in the body; the breath was feeling just right; the quality of the breath was good; the sense of the breath going throughout the whole body gave a sense of wholeness and fullness; everything in the body seemed to be coordinated; and your awareness filled the body. When you've got all those steps brought together – and they're not one-after-the-other steps; they're seven factors of a well-balanced mind: When all seven factors are there, the mind settles down. It feels good about settling down. It feels like it's settling down in a healthy, sound, and wholesome way.

So if things aren't going right in your meditation, take a mental note. Say, "Well, which of the factors is lacking right now?" And then work on that. As you work on it, you find that often it has more implications than you might have assumed to begin with. What this comes down to is learning how to sensitize yourself, to listen to the quality of the breath the same way a pianist listens to himself play. The more sensitive you are as a listener, the better a pianist you are. The more sensitive you are in listening to the breath, the better a breather you become, and the more the breath can do for you.

So here's this whole area here in the present moment: the field of energy in which you find yourself sitting here right now. Instead of thinking of the body as a solid lump sitting here, think of it as a field of energy. Your sense of it as a solid lump is based on what you've seen, but when you sit here and feel the body from the inside, it has a different quality entirely. If you can get in touch with how it actually feels as opposed to the mental picture that you've imposed on top of it, you develop a whole new sense of what's going on here. So you learn to get yourself more and more in touch with what's actually experienced directly right here and now through your sense of feeling the body from the inside. And it's right there that the mind can really settle down solidly.

If you have to visualize the body, well, visualize it in the ways that Ajaan Lee recommends: Think of the breath energy flowing throughout the whole body, out the pores. In one of his earlier versions of the *Seven Steps* he talked about working with the breath energy *in* the body and then working on the breath energy that *surrounds* the body. There's a field that surrounds the body. If you

get in touch with that, then there's a lot more to play with. So there's plenty here to keep you absorbed in the present moment.

Focusing on just these issues accomplishes an awful lot. It gets the mind to settle down in the present moment; it gets you more sensitive to the present moment; it gets the mind more connected to the body in a healthier way; and it helps you learn about the breath energy and what it can do for you.

So you learn to make use of this healthier sense of breathing that comes when the mind is really sensitive to what's going on. Once you're able to settle down with the sensation of the breath energy right in the present moment, you've got a foundation. And the trick then is learning how to take that foundation and use it in other contexts as well, not just when you're sitting here with your eyes closed. Stay with this foundation when you get up, walk around, deal with people, do whatever your work may be. Try to be in touch with this flow of energy in the body. It gives a whole new quality to your life.

At the same time, the skills that you're learning here, sitting with your eyes closed, can also be used outside. Being in touch with the breath gives the mind a sense of being "at home" no matter where it is. Wherever you go, the breath is there. The sense of fullness that comes from learning how to breathe with a sense of the whole body gives a strong sense of nourishment both to the body and to the mind.

And you find that you're hungering less for specific things to happen. Your sense of wanting people to say things like this or act like that gets loosened up quite a bit. When people say things that don't strike you as proper, don't strike you as what you want, then you're not all that upset about it. It's almost as if in the past you were looking for food from other people and you had to accept whatever scraps they spit in your direction. Of course you got upset when they gave you garbage. But now you don't need food from anyone else. The mind is getting its nourishment right here simply through breathing. So what other people serve up to you or spit at you is no longer a big issue, because you don't need their food. You've got your own food, your own nourishment, right here.

At the same time, you're more in touch with the mind's reactions to things. You'll notice, say, when there's a catch in the breath, a tightness in the chest, a tightness in the stomach, or your hands or arms begin to tense up. You know something's wrong—a new emotion has appeared in the mind.

If you don't have the time to deal with that emotion immediately, you can just breathe through it in the same way that you breathe through any sense of tightness or tension in the body as you're sitting here meditating. It helps to dissipate the antsy feeling that you've got to get that anger, or whatever it is, out of your system by saying something or doing something. You don't have to say

or do anything. Just breathe right through the feeling and let it dissipate out. That way, the tense, nervous energy is gone.

Then you have the chance to look at the purely mental side of what's going on. Are you angry? Are you afraid? What's the emotion that made a change in the body? And what's the best thing to do right now? Once you're free from the feeling that you've got to get something out of your system, you can act in a much more reasonable, much more appropriate way.

So the skills that you're learning as you're sitting here meditating are useful in all contexts. It's simply a question of having the mindfulness and the alertness and the right approach to the problem that enables you to put these skills to use, to remember them and use them when they're needed.

So this issue of being sensitive to the breath is an important skill – a basic survival skill for the mind – so you can get through life without creating a lot of bad karma, a lot of unnecessary suffering for yourself and unnecessary suffering for other people as well.

So stay close to home. Don't overlook the potential of what you've got to learn from right here, right now, right here at the breath: the part of you that's as close as life itself.