

# Beginner's Mind

*November, 2002*

Try to bring a fresh mind to the breath each time you meditate. Imagine that you're someone who hasn't been living in a body for a couple of lifetimes and you're suddenly back in this body with this unusual experience: There's an energy flowing around the body, flowing in the body, flowing in and out. And so you're curious, you're inquisitive, you want to find out what it's like. If you can bring that kind of fresh, inquisitive mind to the meditation, you can learn things. If you have everything all figured out beforehand, it gets in the way of your learning. If you have a lot of negative attitudes about yourself in the meditation, that gets in the way, too. This doesn't mean that we don't bring lessons that we've learned from one session of meditation into the next one, but we have to have the fresh eyes to see whether that particular lesson from the past actually applies right now.

So you have to develop an independent observer who's not tied up with any of the agendas of your mind, who just wants to watch with a sense of inquisitive doubt. We all bring doubts to the meditation. The problem is learning how to bring the right kinds of doubt. Inquisitive doubt is the kind that leads you to learn because it's open to new things. But there are other kinds of doubt, though, that actually get in the way. There's nihilistic doubt, which is not really doubt at all. It's just a different kind of belief—the belief that the practice won't work, or that you aren't up to the practice. So recognise that—it's not really doubt, it's a kind of belief that gets in the way—and look to see what happens, what's actually going on right now.

When you can bring a fresh attitude toward the breath, you start seeing things you didn't see before. There are different kinds of ins and outs to the breathing that you might not have anticipated. You may notice that the breath is coming in and out through a part of the body that you hadn't expected it to before. Or your experience of the in-breath and the out-breath are not quite what you thought they were. And unless you're willing to look again and look again and look again like this, it's hard to see anything new.

So from that point of view, you need the attitude that you're coming new to the breath, coming new to the meditation, each and every time, so that you're not weighted down by the past. When you're new to observing the present, you're also new to observing the lessons you *did* learn from the past. It's not that you totally forget everything. It's just that you're willing to look at everything again in a new light. When the breath is this particular way, does it remind you of any

time you've dealt with the breath in the past? Perceive the breath in this particular way, as it is right now. You have to look with new eyes and then leave your mind open to see what comes in, what it reminds you of in terms of other lessons you learned from the past to see if they would work with this particular kind of breathing. When the mind is open in this way, all the useful things you've learned in the past are right at your fingertips as well.

So when they talk about Beginner's Mind, it doesn't mean that you're totally ignorant, totally forgetful of lessons you've already learned. It's just that you look at things in a fresh light, both what you experience right now and what you remember from the past. You're willing to try on a take that's new. The phrase "try on" is important. Often we feel that we've been committed to a particular way of acting and it seems like a major overhaul to change it. Don't think in those terms. Think in terms of trying something on, experimenting.

When Ajaan Fuang used to say "to play with the breath," this is what he was talking about: Experiment. Get some enjoyment out of it. If you can't get enjoyment out of it, the breath becomes a task master; your meditation object becomes an adversary. It's as if it has guardian demons at the door, like the guardian demons in the temples in Thailand. Just the thought of meditating brings to mind the snarls and the angry faces of the guardian demons, and you get repelled.

So forget about them. Remind yourself that if it weren't for the breath you wouldn't be here right now. The breath has looked after you this long, even though you haven't looked after it very much. Still, it's been faithful and loyal, even though it stayed in the background. Give it the chance to come up to the foreground to see what else it can do when you take proper care of it, give it the attention it deserves.

And think of ways of making the breath interesting. Think of the breath coming in and out of body parts that you normally wouldn't think about: the legs, or the elbows. The base of the spine. Think of what you can do change the experience of the breath, the texture of the breath. How smooth can you make it? One of Ajaan Fuang's students talked about the time when he was meditating in a bus—he wasn't normally that good a meditator, but for some reason when he sat on a bus he found it very easy for the mind to settle down—and the breath felt delicious. Well, how do you make the breath delicious? How does that happen?

In other words, try things out. Use your ingenuity. Use your imagination. They've done studies of people with really good manual skills, the ones who really excel, say, in a sport or a musical instrument. And the ones that are a cut above good are the ones who use their imagination. They think up new ways of doing things. Yo Yo Ma tells of playing a cello in a concert and suddenly one of the strings on his cello broke. Instead of stopping the concert, he decided to see if

he could continue playing the cello with the missing string. Later he said that it was by far one of the most enjoyable concerts he had ever played. He was willing to experiment, use his imagination and see what came.

That's how you learn how to get enjoyment out of your meditation. Use your imagination in finding things that will arrest and intrigue the mind. There's an awful lot going on in the body. Think of all the parts you have in your body. Think about how the breath interacts with them. Ajaan Fuang once talked about feeling the breath in your bones. There's the breath in your blood vessels. See if you can locate those sensations. Once you've located them and can stay with them for a while, what can you do with them next? What can you do with them to make them more pleasant, more interesting, more arresting?

This way the meditation always stays new. If it were a simple cut-and-dried technique, that would be the kind of insight it would produce—cut and dried. But because it's a live process, you're exploring the mind, gaining greater and greater sensitivity to what's going on. And then, as in any exploration, you can't simply just follow the rules. You've got to learn how to make variations on them, try things out, adjust this a little bit, adjust that a little bit.

That way you learn about cause and effect. If you don't experiment, if you don't take an active attitude in being curious, being inquisitive, how are you ever going to learn? How's the meditation going to teach you anything new? It simply becomes a mechanical process and the question is: Are you willing to put your mind through the ringer like that, through an assembly line that somebody else has set up? That's a scary prospect. But if you think of it instead as being a prospect of exploring what's going on inside, gaining a sense of cause and effect inside your mind, you can sort out the causes that are really useful and the ones that aren't.

That's when the meditation really leads to insight—because after all, the insight here is to see what we haven't seen before, to realise what we haven't realised before, so that what we come to see and realise will lead us to attain what we've never attained before. The meditation is supposed to take you to a new place—and that can't happen unless you experiment and explore, unless you keep looking at things anew.