

Quiet in Every Way

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Try to be quiet in every way. The body is sitting here quietly. The breathing is quiet, and as for the chatter of the mind, don't get involved. There are two ways of dealing with it: one is to block it out, say, with a meditation word like *buddho*. You can just think *buddho, buddho, buddho*, very fast. It's like jamming the circuits. Or try to immerse yourself in the breath as much as possible. The chatter may be in the background, but don't pay any attention to it, don't give it any importance. If you don't feed it, you'll find that it gets weaker and weaker. The mind really does get quieter. And only when the mind gets quiet can you begin to notice things.

Once when I was in Rayong a group of people from Bangkok came up the hill to where I was staying in the old ordination hall. They plopped themselves down in the hall and exclaimed how peaceful, how quiet it was there in the monastery. Then they pulled out their boom box and turned it on—all the better to hear the peace and quiet with.

That's the way a lot of us are when we meditate. The body's still, the breath is still, but the mind is like a boom box, broadcasting all kinds of thoughts and concerns. For many of us, meditation is the only time of the day when we get to sit and be with our thoughts without any interruption. But that's not what it's for. We're here to watch, to observe. So, we have to do what we can to discourage the mind's involvement with all that chatter.

The Buddha breaks the mind's chatter down into two different activities: one is directed thought, and the other is evaluation. You direct your thoughts to a topic and then you start mulling it over, commenting on this, commenting on that, backing up and restating things. Sometimes it's as if there are several voices in your head taking on different roles, evaluating things from different perspectives. So what you have to do is to turn your directed thought to the breath and evaluate the breath. You use the mind's verbal abilities, its verbal tendencies, but you're trying to direct them to a better purpose, a quieter purpose.

When you direct your mind to evaluating the breath, there's not that much to think about. Notice when it's coming in, when it's going out. Notice when you're forcing it too much—when there's a squeeze at the end of the breath, or a catch in the breath when you're trying to pull it in. Notice how you relate to the breath energy, which parts of the in-breath you like and don't like, which parts of the

out-breath you like and don't like. It's amazing that you can have all kinds of opinions even about this.

At the very least, though, as you get more interested in the breath, other thoughts quiet down because you're not feeding them. If you pay attention to all the vagrant chatter in the mind, of course it's going to keep on going. Sometimes simply paying attention to the extent of telling it to stop actually encourages it, so you have to try another approach, which is to direct your verbal tendencies to the breath. Think up questions about the breath. In general, that's how you direct your thoughts to things. You get curious and ask questions. "What's this? What's going on here? Is the breath as good as it could be? What *is* a good breath?" Do your best to get interested in the breath. To evaluate it you just have to watch it. The more still the mind, the more you can see.

Ajaan Lee breaks the breath energy in the body down to three levels. First there's the in-and-out breath; then there's the waves of breath energy that go through the body along the nerves and the blood vessels as you breathe in and breathe out; and then there's a still breath, which you can locate in the resting spots for the breath that he mentions in Method 2: the tip of the nose, the palate, the base of the throat, the tip of the sternum, the point just above the navel. If you can get really quiet, you can sense that there's a stillness at these points that you can access. And there's a way of focusing in on that stillness so that it seems to spread throughout the whole body, radiating out from those points.

Now, the only way you can notice these very subtle breath sensations is to make the mind as quiet as possible. Just watch, like a hunter. The hunter has to be very still so as not to scare the animals away, but at the same time very alert so that he notices when they come. Or we can make a comparison with the mind state we try to develop when we're listening to something faint and faraway and we want to hear it very clearly. We get everything inside as quiet as possible so that we can pick up the subtle sounds coming our way. The only way you can really pick up on the subtleties of the breath is to get the mind and body as quiet as possible, with your thoughts directed to the breath. If you make things quiet without focusing on an object, the mind begins to drift, and it has a very strong tendency to go to sleep or to blur out, blank out, which doesn't accomplish anything at all. There has to be a focus—the focus of a hunter.

Anthropologists say that when they try to pick up the skills of primitive tribes, these are the hardest of all—the skills of a hunter—because being a hunter requires so much mind/body discipline. So we need to be disciplined, even though it takes effort, for we're here hunting the deathless. In the beginning we're hunting subtle breaths, and then we're hunting the still breath energy, and then we're hunting the state of the still mind, and then we're hunting the very subtle movements in the still mind. This requires successive levels of getting

more and more still. So if you sense anything disturbing the stillness, just let it go. Don't get involved. Don't let it entangle you. Direct your thoughts to being as sensitive as possible to the breath.

This process develops to the point where you're so immersed in the breath that you don't even have to direct your thought to the breath anymore. It's as if your awareness and the breath are one. Then you just maintain that focus, that sense of oneness. That allows the mind to get even more still. Even the subtle level of inner chatter that goes along with directing the breath and evaluating can be dropped as well. In fact, you find that a lot of the progress in concentration practice comes from noticing even more subtle levels of chatter and letting them go. Then you run across an even more subtle level. You keep peeling away, finding all kinds of crazy things being said in the mind. But you let them go, until it's just the chatter that keeps the mind on its topic, whether it's the stillness of the breath, or a sense of space or a sense of knowing. When you can stay on these topics, they're called perception-attainments. At that point your thinking isn't called directed thought and evaluation. It's simply *perception*, the labels you put on things, which hardly qualify as verbal *sankharas*. They're mental *sankharas*. Verbal *sankharas* are sentences; these are simply *words*. But still they count as a kind of disturbance. Stay with that particular level as long as it keeps you focused, and learn to let it go when it becomes an obstacle to seeing things that are even more subtle.

You can take this approach as a basic principle all the way through the practice because it embodies a lot of different teachings, like the four Noble truths: look for where there's stress, in this case the disturbance; see what you're doing to maintain it; let it go. This approach also embodies the teachings on emptiness. Notice what your mind is empty of, notice what's still there, disturbing it, and see if you can let go of the disturbance without destroying your state of concentration. As the Buddha said, there is no happiness aside from peace; there is no knowledge aside from what can be seen with a still mind. Everything else is guesswork.