

Breath Energies

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An important principle in practicing meditation is that you be interested in your topic. If you find it boring, you're not going to stay with it very long. So when you look at the breath, what is there to be interested in? Some people see it just as in and out. One of Ajaan Lee's friends once complained to him about this very point. "What is there to gain insight into?" he asked. "It's just in and out." And Ajaan Lee said, "If that's all you see it, then that's all you're going to get out of it."

The problem of the breath is with the way we look. Because what is it? It's the basic energy that holds the body together. It's the energy that holds the body and mind together. If you look at it carefully, you see there's a lot going on with the in-breath and with the out-breath, because these breaths are related to other types of energy in the body as well. In Thai they refer to all these kinds of energy as "breath." You've got the in-and-out breath. Then there's the energy that runs along the nerves, the energy that runs along the blood vessels, that contracts or relaxes all those little tiny muscles in the walls of blood vessels. Have you ever looked to see if you can sense that energy? It's there. If the mind is really quiet, you can see it.

Sometimes there's a sense, when you're breathing in, that energy is coming up to the head. Other times, there's a sense that it's flowing down the shoulders and down the back. When you focus on the up-flowing energy or the down-flowing energy, what does that do? How does that affect your sense of the body? Sometimes too much up-flowing energy can make you tense or give rise to headaches. Too much down-flowing energy can make you sluggish. So how are you going to know what's just right? You have to watch. You have to experiment.

This is another important principle in the meditation: the willingness to experiment. As Ajaan Fuang once said, if you have to be told everything, you're never going to learn. You're never going to learn how to look, how to judge the results of your meditation on your own. If you don't learn that, where are you going to get any discernment? Discernment requires a willingness to take chances and then see what results. Sometimes you make a mistake, but you can learn from the mistake. As Ajaan Fuang once said, there's no mistake in meditation that can't be undone.

So you focus on the breath as you experience it. If you can't yet experience the more subtle levels of breathing, focus on the levels you *can* experience. Stay with

those. Because it's the staying that makes the mind still, and it's the stillness that makes the other, more subtle things apparent. But always be aware that there's more to explore.

The two most important principles in the exploring and the experimenting are the two words Ajaan Fuang stressed most in his meditation instructions. One, observe. Two, use your imagination. And "imagination" here doesn't mean that you think about things far away. You use your imagination in asking questions about the breath right here. What would long breathing be like? What would short breathing be like? How about broad breathing? How about narrow breathing? How about, as Ajaan Lee says, thinking of the breath coming in the back of the skull, going down the spine: What would that be like? You start out with the principles he mentions in the seven steps, but then you can go beyond them. Think of the breath coming in and out the soles of the feet, the palms of the hands. And how do you relax the feet, relax the hands to the point where you can actually feel the energy there?

So use your imagination in asking questions and then use your powers of observation to see what comes out as a result. That's how you experiment with the breath. This is what makes it interesting. It gets to the point where you don't have to keep telling yourself to stay with the breath, because you find it absorbing. That provides you with a foundation for staying in the present moment. If you have to stay by tying the mind down or forcing it too much, eventually it gets tired or it rebels. But if you give it something to play with, it's happy to stay. You've got this big doll right here—the whole body—so you can play with the body. You can play with all the different elements in the body: the sense of warmth, the sense of coolness, the sense of heaviness, the sense of energy. There's plenty to experiment with here in the present moment.

Then you can experiment with other things. How long is a good length of time to sit? Try various lengths of sitting times to see what happens. How long should you sit with pain? Again, try. Be willing to experiment. Be willing to put up with some pain for a while to see what you learn, for it's this state of mind that gains discernment: a state that's willing to experiment, so that you learn how to judge things on your own.

The texts talk about concentration giving rise to discernment. This is how it happens. It's not just that you get the mind still and then you start seeing things. As you get the mind still and then learn how to ask questions in that stillness, you learn how to keep re-framing the questions. Starting with simple things like the breath and then moving on to pain: Why is there pain in the mind? And what do you learn as you take that pain apart in the mind?

This morning someone asked a question: How you get rid of that bothersome sense of self that keeps causing a lot of trouble? Well, don't throw it out once and for all. You peel it away layer by layer. And where do you look for it? You look for it best where there's pain, either physical pain or mental pain. It's got to be lurking around there. If you can see it not as a constant thing, this sense of self, but as something you keep creating over and over and over again in different forms, then you begin to see how you do it. When you see how you do it and you see that it's not really necessary, then you can let it go.

Most of us have a very solidified idea about our sense of self and we can't conceive how we can function without it. But when you actually look how the sense of self is created, you see that it's constantly re-created all the time. Sometimes you identify with this; sometimes you identify with that. Sometimes you feel you're the body, sometimes you feel you're the pain. Sometimes you feel you're the experiencer of the pain. Sometimes you identify with your thoughts, sometimes with the way you label things. There are lots of different selves that you keep making over time.

When you start seeing them as processes, and can see that they're not always necessary—and often are troublemakers—you learn to pare down the different ways that you create a sense of self. You learn to use a sense of self when it's useful and necessary, and you can let go of it when it's not. Huge burdens get removed from the mind that way.

Then you do this again by getting the mind still and asking unexpected questions, learning how to reframe the way you look at your mind, refrain the way you look at yourself, not as a thing but as an activity, as a whole bag full of strategies, all aimed at happiness. Which is why, when you see that your sense of self is actually causing suffering—you see it in the act and you see that it's not necessary—the whole thing short-circuits. After all, what is it there for if not to create happiness? When you see that it's not doing its expected job, then you drop that particular strategy.

This is how, bit by bit by bit, you start taking the whole problem apart. The approach follows the same principle you used with the breath. If you've been breathing in a way that's uncomfortable but then look at it carefully, you begin to realize: Why do you have to breathe that way? Nobody's forcing you. There are lots of other ways to breathe that are much more comfortable. That's the beginning of discernment, and it goes to deeper levels, as you use that same principle of observing processes as they happen, and peeling away the ones that are counterproductive. It's simply a matter of getting more precise and more sensitive as you do this.

So this approach of looking at the breath, working with the breath, making it more comfortable, is basic training in the skills that are going to lead to awakening. You've got yourself started on the skills right away. So do your best to perfect them.