

## *Calming the Breath*

*September 22, 2007*

There's a passage in the Canon where the Buddha's advising the monks to do breath meditation, and one of the monks volunteers that he does breath meditation already. So the Buddha asks him, "What kind of breath meditation do you do?" And the monk says, "I put away thoughts of past, put away thoughts of future, and let my mind be equanimous toward whatever is arising in the present, as I breathe in and breathe out."

The Buddha's response is, "Well, there is that kind of breath meditation." But he adds that that's not how breath meditation brings great fruit, great rewards. Then to give an idea of what kind of meditation *does* give great fruit and great rewards, he lists the 16 steps of breath meditation that are repeated throughout the Canon.

The first four steps are particularly important because they give you the foundation for the rest. In the first two, you're simply watching the breath coming in and going out, being sensitive to when it's long and when it's short. You're already beginning to see distinctions in the breathing to realize that not every breath is the same, but you just note that fact. With the third step, though, the Buddha starts using the phrase, "The meditator trains himself," or "The meditator trains herself." And the first thing you train yourself to do is to be aware of the whole body as you breathe in, to be aware of the whole body as you breathe out.

The next step is calming bodily fabrication as you breathe in, calming bodily fabrication as you breathe out. This is an important step. The term "bodily fabrication" here means specifically the in-and-out breath, and it seems to mean even more specifically the intentional element that you bring to each breath—because, as we all know, the breath is one of the few bodily functions that is both automatic and willed, something you can change. As often happens when you start focusing on the breath, you immediately start changing it. It becomes more a willed activity, not just something happening on its own.

You want to be sensitive to that fact. You want to be sensitive to how your *willing* affects the breath, and then learn how to calm that, because often the willed part of the breath is based on our cartoon ideas of the body. What happens when you breathe in? Our cartoon idea is that the body's like a big balloon or a big bellows that you have to swell up to bring the breath in, and then squeeze to push the breath out. So there are certain muscles in the body that we tend to use as we breathe in, tend to use as we breathe out. We have certain sensations that we read

as clear signs the breath is coming in, clear signs the breath is going out. There's an intentional element in those sensations, just as there's an intentional element in the perception that the mind uses to tell the body to breathe. Often this intentional element can be unskillful.

The role of intention is really important both in the way we cause ourselves to suffer and in how we help to bring suffering to an end. Even our basic experience of the five aggregates—our experience of the form (the body), feelings of pleasure and pain, our perceptions, our thought constructs, even our sensory consciousness: As the Buddha says, we *fabricate* these things for certain purposes. The best way to test this is by watching the breath. This is why this process of (1) being sensitive to the whole body and then, (2) being able to calm breath fabrication is so important to the breath meditation, because it allows the breath to get more comfortable.

Your awareness is not narrowed down. You're aware of the whole body as you breathe in, the whole body as you breathe out, and it gives you a good, solid foundation. If your concentration is too one-pointed, then when you move the point, you've lost your concentration. If the object of your concentration is broad—like the whole body—then thoughts can move in, thoughts can move out, and it's as if they go through a screen on the window. The screen stays in place. The wind goes through the screen, but the screen is still there. So developing this whole-body framework is crucial for stable concentration.

Once you're sensitive to the whole body, you can begin to see how you perceive the breathing process. This is where the teachings on the four elements come in handy. We tend to see them as medieval chemistry, where earth, water, wind, and fire sound like the kind of chemistry they did before they learned about the *real* atomic elements. But the Buddha here is talking about elementary feelings: how your body feels to you from the inside.

Again, this can be willed. You focus on solid sensations, and the earth element or the sense of solidity gets stronger. You can focus on the warmth in the body, and you can actually make the body feel warmer if you intend to make it warmer. Start with wherever you can sense a warmth here and there in the body. Focus on those spots and think of all them connecting up. You can actually warm up your sense of the body through this factor of intention. And it helps if you can perceive this as possible. If you think it's impossible, it's going to be impossible. If you perceive it as possible, you find that you really can do this, depending on the strength of your concentration and your ability to hold that perception in mind.

If you perceive the wind or breath element as filling the body, stop and think about it. It's your primary experience of the body—the movement of the breath.

If it weren't for this, you wouldn't experience the body at all. The energy in the body is actually your primary experience of the body. We often feel that the solid parts of the body are a really direct experience of the body, and then the breath is something that the solid parts have to bring in and push out. If you perceive the breathing process that way, the breathing is going to be harsh. But if you think of the whole body as breath—permeated with breath—the breath can go anywhere. It's the energy that goes through the atoms. That way, when you breathe in and breathe out, you don't have to fight. You don't have to pull; you don't have to push. It's coming in and out through all the pores.

You may have heard of the Pageant on the Masters they put on in Laguna Beach, where they try to recreate paintings and statues. When they make someone look like a statue—as they cover him or her with the white makeup—they've found that if you cover the whole body, the person's going to faint. You get Michelangelo's David out there on the stage, and after five minutes, he faints. It's not a very inspiring spectacle. They discovered they had to leave a large patch along the back that's free of makeup so that the skin can still breathe.

So there is an oxygen exchange happening at the skin all the time. Think of it as a breath process. And think of this energy you feel in the body as you sit here as breath energy. The breath can go anywhere; it can penetrate anything. If you create walls around it, then it'll get channeled into walls, and it'll be uncomfortable. But if you think of it as totally wide open, that makes the breathing process easier.

This is one way of calming the breathing process. In other words, you're not trying to hold your breath. You're trying to perceive the breath energy in a way that makes it easier to breathe—less stressful, less strenuous. You don't want even the slightest sense of effort in the breathing process. So if you can hold the perception of whole body as breath, when you breathe in and out, it comes in and out through every pore of the skin. Just hold that perception in mind and see what it does to the way you breathe—how the breathing process is felt. You find that it calms it down and makes it a lot easier.

Back when I had malaria, I remember waking up one morning only to find that my shoulders really hurt, and each breath was difficult. I realized I was holding on to the concept that the breath had to come in and out the nose, and I reminded myself, "Well, there are all these other spots in the body where the breath can come in and out. Think of them being wide open." Immediately, the way the body breathed changed. The muscles that were involved in the breathing process changed. The ones that had been working hard all night long got to rest,

and other muscles moved in. Then the breathing became a lot easier simply by changing the perception.

The value of this is two-fold. On the one hand, it makes the body a much more pleasant place to be. You're not sitting here with anything solid getting in the way of the breath. Think of the breath being able to permeate everything. You've got a full-body framework for your mind to focus on, and it's easeful. It feels good. The mind is a lot more likely to stay and to develop a sense of rapture, a sense of fullness. As you breathe in and breathe out, nothing's being forced; nothing's being pushed. It feels really good.

At the same time, you're beginning to see the power of perception—how simply changing a perception can change your experience. This gives you insight into the connections between events in the body and events in the mind.

So even here in the first couple of stages of training yourself to be a breath meditator, you're not just getting into tranquility, but you're also gaining some insights. And the insights are immediate. They're very personal, very direct, very visceral—dealing right with how you breathe and the way your awareness relates to the breath.

Try to let yourself perceive the breath in this way. Hold this perception in mind: full body, breath energy permeating every little cell, every little atom. Everything's open. Think of the breath energy as being connected and whole, and the mind will be a lot more likely to settle down. The concentration you develop will be the kind of concentration that's primed for insight.

This is why the Buddha taught breath meditation in this way.