

## *Nourishment from the Breath*

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There's a passage where the Buddha compares different aspects of the path to a fortress in the frontier. For example, mindfulness is the gatekeeper; discernment is the slippery wall that keeps the enemy from coming in. The food for the fortress is concentration. It's good to keep this in mind.

When you find yourself running out of energy, when there are really strong tasks that have to be done and you need to need extra reserves of energy to draw on and you want to replenish your energy, you want to bring the mind to stillness.

And not just any old stillness. There's a passage where the Buddha tells the monks that it's good for them to practice concentration based on mindfulness of breathing. One of the monks speaks up and says, "Yes, I already do that." The Buddha asks him, "Well, how do you do that?" The monk replies, "I put aside my interest in the past and my desires for the future, and I just try to be equanimous about the present as I breathe in and breathe out." The Buddha responds, "Well there is that kind breath meditation, but that's not how you get the best results out of it." For the best results, he goes through the 16 steps, starting with being sensitive to long breathing, being sensitive to short breathing.

This quality of being sensitive is important. The more sensitive you are to the breath, the more you'll naturally breathe in a comfortable way. If you put the breath on automatic pilot, it just tends to go in and out, in and out, and it gets pretty mechanical. But if you try to sensitize yourself to how the breath actually feels as it comes in—where you feel it, which parts feel pleasant, which areas of the body feel pleasant as the breath comes in, which parts feel stressed: If you're sensitive, you can locate the stressed parts and make them feel pleasant by changing the rhythm, changing the range of your breath, changing the length.

This is an area of our awareness that we tend to be very insensitive to because, as we all know, we have more important things to do than just breathe. But the breath is what keeps us going. If it becomes mechanical, it gets uncomfortable. And when it's uncomfortable, the body feels ill at ease, the mind feels irritable, and it saps your strength. After all, the breath is the energy of life. So you want to give it your full attention when you can.

The Pali term for this is *citta*: intent, being really sensitive. It's one of the bases for success or bases for power, one of the factors that have to be involved in any kind of concentration. There are times when you want to bring that particular quality to the fore. As the Buddha says about the bases for power, you always have

to have the desire and persistence and intent for there to be concentration to begin with. You have to want to get the mind to settle down, you have to stick with it, and you have to pay full attention.

The fourth basis for success is what turns the concentration into a skill. That's discrimination. When you get clearer and clearer on what's wrong and what's right with the concentration, and you start getting ideas of how to fix what's wrong and to maintain and augment what's right, that's the discernment element.

In other words, you have to have some discernment in your concentration. Concentration without discernment drifts off and is not really all that nourishing. You've got to sensitize yourself and be very alert, very aware of what's going on. The more sensitive you are, the more you'll be aware of the subtle areas in the body where there's stress, and you can do something about them.

You broaden not only your awareness of the breath but also your concept of what's involved in the breathing. It's not just the air coming in and out of the lungs or the air passing over the nostrils, it's the whole feeling of energy in the body. Different parts can feel like they're flowing in one direction and then another direction, different parts can feel still, and there are parts that seem to be spinning around in place. There's a breath energy that's always there in the body that you have to be very careful not to squeeze as you try to push the in-breath in and push the out-breath out. You want to keep all the little muscles in your blood vessels relaxed, open. Just breathe in whatever way feels most gratifying, because that's what's going to energize you. It gives rise to a sense of ease, a sense of fullness and rapture. That's your food.

There's a passage in the Dhammapada where the Buddha says, "How happy we are, we who have nothing. We feed on rapture like the radiant gods." We look for the mind's nourishment in the sense of well-being, the sense of fullness that can come from concentration, but we have to give it our full attention for it to work. Often we get the mind in a nice place, and then we think, "Okay, let the mind go on automatic pilot, I've got other things to think about, other things to worry about," and you lose it.

That quality of full attention and full sensitivity: When that goes, then the refreshing quality of the breath begins to deteriorate as well. So while you're here, this is all you have to do. Be sensitive to the breath and then respond to whatever feels best, respond what doesn't feel comfortable so as to make it feel comfortable. Allow that sense of fullness to spread around the body, to radiate out. One good way of doing this is to find one spot in the body that you're going to take as your focal point, and make sure it stays relaxed, open and full, all the way through the in-breath, all the way through the out-. If you notice the point at which the out-

breath begins to feel strained, stop and breathe back in. When it reaches the point when it feels strained breathing in, okay, stop, then breathe back out.

But think of it being wide open all the way through the in-breath, all the way through the out-. Think of that sense of fullness spreading around the body like melted butter. Then do what you can to maintain it. Part of the mind might say, “Hey, there’s this you’ve got to think about, there’s that you’ve got to think about,” but you’ve got to say, “No, not now. Not now. This is more important. You need to restock your energy. You need to replenish your energy.”

We’ve been through a lot for the past couple days, and there’s more work down the road. So this is our food. This is our store of supplies to keep the soldiers in our fortress well fed. This comes down to the essence of the Buddha’s approach, which is that you look for your wealth, you look for your nourishment inside. It may not seem like much—all you’ve got is your body sitting here breathing, your mind thinking and aware—but it’s the way you put them all together that makes all the difference. There are treasures in here, all kinds of good things, if you allow them to develop, if you know how to develop them. This is where you start, learning how to develop and then to maintain a sense of fullness and ease that you can feed on. This can give you the energy you need to put up with all the other difficulties there are living this human life.

So sensitize yourself to the breath. This is an area we tend to overlook. You may say, “I’ve seen the breath many times before.” Well, you haven’t seen this particular breath. You haven’t been sensitive to this particular breath before. It may be similar to other breaths you’ve breathed, but you’ve got to keep giving your full attention to it. It always has to be new, it always has to be fresh, your approach to what you’re doing.

Ajaan Lee makes an interesting point. He says mindfulness of breathing is like medicine for the body, medicine for the mind. The actual medicine is the mindfulness and alertness; the breath is—he uses the Thai word, *krasai*, which means the medium in which you mix the medicine so that it can spread out throughout the body. In other words, your mindfulness and alertness are the real medicine. The breath is what spreads the medicine around. So it’s this quality of sensitive alertness that’s the actual food or the cause of the food, the cause of the nourishment that you get from the concentration. So give your full attention to each breath as it happens.

There’s another spot where Ajaan Lee says that most of us get only 10% of the energy out of each breath that we could. The more energy you give to it, the more attention you give to it, the more sensitivity you bring to it, then the greater

percentage of the energy you can derive from the breathing. The more you give to it, the more you get back.

So try to be sensitive to the breath not only in your chosen spot, but always make a point of looking around the body to see if there are any spots that tend to get neglected. Give them your full awareness for a while too. You'll be surprised at how energizing that can be, both for the body and for the mind.