

The Buddha's Sixteen Steps

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There's a passage where the Buddha's recommending breath meditation to the monks. One of monks says, "I'm already doing breath meditation." And the Buddha asks him, "What kind of breath meditation are you doing?" And the monk says, "I suppress any sensual desires for the past, any sensual desires for the future, and abandoning any sense of irritation of the present, I breathe in, I breathe out." In other words, he's practicing equanimity. Whatever comes up, he is going to be equanimous to it, and he is not going to try to move for any pleasure, any sensual pleasure, any memory of the sensual pleasure in the past or any anticipation of the sensual pleasure for the future.

The Buddha's response is interesting. He says, "Well, there is that kind of breath meditation, but that's not how you get the most out of breath meditation." Then he teaches what you might call the Buddha's sixteen step program. And when you look at the first few steps, you realize that he's going in a very different direction. Instead of just being very passive and allowing whatever is going to happen to happen, he's got a program. There's an agenda in mind.

First, though, he starts out with a simple exercise of being aware of the breath when it's long, being aware of the breath when it's short, as a given. But then with the third step he starts using a new phrase. He says that you *train* yourself to be aware of the whole body as you breathe, aware of the whole body as you breathe out. In other words, you're not just letting things happen. You're training your perceptions in a specific direction.

Now this has to do with the Buddha's teachings on experience as a whole. He says that you can classify your experience into five aggregates—form, feeling, perception, fabrications, and consciousness. And you never really experience these things in a raw form. The mind works them over. There's an intention behind your experience of each of these things, shaping the raw material of your past karma into the actual experience of these aggregates.

The intentional element is what he's trying to get you to see and to take advantage of. If you just watch things arising and passing, saying, "I'm just sitting here passively watching the arising, watching the passing away," you're closing off the mind to the fact that it's adjusting things behind the scenes. This habit of ignoring a part of what you're doing in the present moment is a habit the Buddha is trying to get at, because so many attempts to gain awakening do just that. They close off large areas of your awareness, and say, "I'm letting go of s," and when then you've let go of s, you think you've accomplished something. But in the meantime you've been holding onto y, but holding onto y happens underground. It's in a blind spot of your mind. So what the Buddha is trying to do is get you aware of those blind spots, aware of what you're doing.

To call your attention to the fact, he has you train yourself to do something in the present moment so that you get more and more sensitive to exactly what you are doing all the time in the present. After having you aware of the whole body as you breathe in, aware of the whole body as you breathe out, you begin to notice that simply making yourself aware of the whole body is going to change your breath. You start seeing that the breath is a whole-body process.

The parts of the body that you've been allowing to be uncomfortable as you breathe in, or as you breathe out, you're not going to allow them to be uncomfortable any more.

This leads to the next step, which is calming bodily fabrication, i.e. the patterns of tension that you send through the body, the intentional side of the breathing process. You want to calm those things down. In other words, work through them; find ways of breathing that allow the whole body to breathe in a way that's together, so that there's a sense of the whole body breathing in together, and no parts are fighting against other parts. In doing that, you've just alerted yourself to something: that there were parts of your body that you were totally ignoring, things that you were holding onto that you didn't have to. That right there is probably one of the most important lessons in the meditation: to look all around.

This is why the whole-body awareness is something you really want to work on, because the more fully you're aware of the whole body, the more fully you are going to be aware of your whole mind. If you are just aware of one point, there's a huge area for greed, anger, delusion, and all kinds of other things going on in the present, to hide. Even just the simple act of fabricating things in the present, whether it's innocent or not, is going to stay in the background, and you won't get to see it.

This is why you hear so many cases where people who claim awakening, having followed a certain set menu of what they should be doing, and they pass the test, whatever test the teachers set for them, they got transmission or whatever, but then they still go and behave in really unskillful ways. It's because they really haven't learned how to look at what they're doing, the decisions they're making, the choices they're making, the intentions they have in the present moment. This is why you want to become as sensitive of the whole body as you can. If you sense any unnecessary tension in the in-breath, unnecessary tension in the out-breath, allow it to relax. You can start exploring different ways of making the breath more comfortable. This is why Ajaan Lee has that as one of his steps, to see what ways of breathing calm that bodily fabrications so that the breath feels comfortable all the way in, all the way out.

This leads up to the next step, being sensitive to rapture—or refreshment, which is probably a better translation of the Pali word, *pīti*. Breathe in with a sense of refreshment; breath out with a sense of refreshment. And this is how you get there, by being aware of the whole body, by calming the way the breath comes in, calming the way the breath goes out. This allows for a sense of fullness. It's almost as if every cell in your body is allowed to have its space and to fill up its space, all the way down to the tips of your toes, all the way down to the tips of your fingers, through all the muscles of your head, through all the muscles at the back of your head, down the back of your neck, all the parts of the body that you tend to ignore. Allow all of them to have their space, so that they are not squeezed with the out-breath, not pressured with the in-breath. The more there's a sense of connectedness of the breath energy throughout the body, the less pressure you have to apply. It's almost as if you allow all the pores of your skin to open up, and everybody gets to breathe. Everybody gets to have a part of the breath.

This also leads to a sense of ease, and sometimes that sense of refreshment or fullness can get too intense, which is why the next step is to become sensitive to not only the feelings, but also to the perceptions. Together, they're called mental fabrications. Become sensitive to what these are doing to the process of breath—how your perception of the breath, how your perception of what's going on as the body breathes in, breathe out, affects the actual experience of the breath. Maybe you can change the perception.

One perception I've found useful is one that Ajaan Fuang recommended. He said, there is a line of breath energy running down the middle of your body. When the breath comes in, it comes in to nourish that line, and when it goes out, it goes out of that line. So it's not like you try to pull the breath in just through the nostrils. The breath is coming in from every direction, to fill up that line in the middle. Then you want to make sure the line doesn't get squeezed out even as you breathe out. Keep it full, so that whatever breath energy is helpful stays in the body, and only those breath energies that seem excessive or unpleasant at the moment can go.

Another useful perception is of the body as a big sponge, with all the holes in the sponge connected, so that when you breathe in one part of the body, it can connect with every other part of the body. Or you can find whatever other perceptions help to keep the breath as calm, to keep that sense of ease in the body as calm as possible. Because that's the next step: to calm down these mental fabrications, i.e. the feelings and the perceptions, until there eventually arises the perception of the whole body as just being filled with breath energy, and it gets more and more still. Ultimately, you can actually reach the point where the sense of the in-and-out breath stops. There's just breath energy filling the body and it's sufficient. The mind is still. What's happening is that you're using less and less oxygen in the brain, so your need for in-and-out breathing gets reduced. The oxygen coming in the pores is enough to keep you going.

The next step is simply to train yourself to be aware of the mind as you breathe in and breathe out. This is where your focus shifts a little bit. You're still with the breath, and just as you were aware of the feelings that were related to the breath in steps five through eight, now you're aware of how the mind relates the breath, the state of the mind. Just learn how to watch that. Learn which states of mind help the breath, which states of mind are harmful to the breath. Also learn which ways of breathing are helpful to the mind, and which ways are not. You want to see the relationship between these two things, because this helps get you thinking even more in terms of cause and effect, as to how what is going on in the mind affects your experience of something as basic as this, the breath coming in, the breath going out. This is where you're going to start getting insights in terms of the four noble truths.

The next three steps involve noticing when the mind feels out of balance and trying different ways to can get it back into balance. If you find the mind is a little bit wobbly on the breath, what can you do to steady it? In other words, here you're trying to master the various states of concentration. It's not enough to get into a state of concentration once, or to get into concentration only when you have your eyes closed. You want to see what you can do with the breath to balance the mind in any situation, when you're out walking around, driving, when you're shopping, sitting at the computer, dealing with difficult people. What can you do to keep your mind steady so that it doesn't go straying out into unfortunate and unskillful areas? This may relate to where you focus on the breath energy in the body, how consistently you focus on it, what ways of thinking, what values you have that remind you that this is really important. If somebody is yelling at you, don't go out and eat up what they are yelling at you. Stay inside of the body. This involves not only breathing techniques, but also your whole set of values: what's important in life, how you can deal with the situation skillfully.

A similar principle applies with the other two steps, learning how to gladden the mind when it's feeling down; or if it's energy is low, how you bring it up. When you feel burdened with various things, how do you release the mind from the sense of burden? This can include gross burdens like the hindrances, or more subtle ones, as when you get the mind in a state of concentration by thinking about and evaluating the breath, how can you let go of the thinking

and evaluation, once you've settled in, so that you can just be one with the breath: That's a kind of release. When states of rapture starts feeling oppressive, how can you let go of those? That's another kind of release, all the way up through the various factors you drop as you to get into progressively more subtle levels of concentration.

What you're doing here is learning how to master the concentration so that you can use it in any situation. Keep the mind balanced, satisfied, gladdened, steady, and with a sense of freedom. This level of mastery also gives you more insight into cause and effect: what works in steadying the mind, for instance, will have to involve the relationships among the various types of fabrication.

It's only then that you are ready for the last four steps, which deal more in terms of insight. The first is keeping track of inconstancy, just making up your mind that you're going to watch the inconstancy of breath, the inconstancy of the mind, the inconstancy of whatever comes up. Even if a state of concentration feels relatively solid, in what ways is it still inconstant? You try to get the mind as concentrated as possible, as still as possible, and then watch it to see: Is there still any movement in here? It'll take a while to start noticing that. There is a wavering, there's an unsteadiness even in really good solid concentration, because after all, it is a fabricated thing. What you're trying to do is see how the mind fabricates. This is the ideal laboratory for it, because you're watching it with as little interference as possible.

When you really see that inconstancy, then you see the other two themes, which are the stress that's in the inconstancy and the fact that if it's inconstant and stressful, it's not worth claiming as yours. So the next step is breathing in and an with a sense of dispassion, and then just watching the dispassion for the process of fabrication. Again it's not that there are things out there that you're watching and becoming dispassionate toward. You become dispassionate toward the activities you've been doing all along, fabricating things, which you've learned how to see because you've been consciously fabricating your concentration. But now you begin to realize that no matter how skillfully you fabricate things, it can only go so far. When you feel dispassion for these activities, that's how they cease, because it's passion for them, you're desire to keep at them, that kept them going. So you watch the cessation of fabrications as you breathe in, as you breathe out.

The last stage is relinquishment, when you give up everything, not just the things that you've fabricated, but even the insights you gained into these things. You give up even your attachment to the experience of the deathless that comes as a result. There are suttas where the Buddha points out that if you have an experience of the deathless, it is possible to latch onto that and develop a passion for it. There can be a subtle sense of becoming that builds up around that. That's what separates the lower levels of awakening from the higher ones. If you're not alert to what you're doing in the present moment, you're not going to see that. If you haven't had practice from the very beginning—noticing how you shape even your breath, or how you shape your feelings, how you shape your perceptions—there is no way you're going to see how you get attached to what seems unconditioned. So you're bound to latch on to it, just as another kind of attachment. But if you've been sensitized to how you shape the present moment, you're going to see it, and then you can totally let go. You can relinquish even that. That's when there's full awakening.

So those are the Buddha's sixteen steps. When you follow them, it's not just a matter of simply allowing whatever is going to arise to arise, and allowing it to pass away. You consciously develop states of concentration. It's an intentional form of becoming, so that you can see the

process of becoming in action, so you can let go of different kinds of clinging that underlie it, and you've got an all-around awareness of what those forms of clinging are. To get the mind into concentration, you've got to let go of clinging to sensuality, but that leaves the other three: clinging to views, clinging to habits, and clinging to ideas of yourself.

What the Buddha's teaching you is to have an all-around sense of how you create a sense of becoming, and how views and habits, and a sense of yourself, play a part in creating those states, and how it's necessary to refine your views and your habits and your sense of self in order to get the mind into concentration. Then, when they've done the work, that's when you let them go. If you try to abandon everything from the beginning, one, it short-circuits the path; and two, a lot of things you thought you've abandoned just go into the back rooms in your mind. Or they go behind the curtain, and they pull the levers and push the buttons behind the curtain, but you have no idea that they're there, because you've been ignoring their existence. So the purpose of this practice is to develop an all-around awareness, so that no matter what's going on in the mind, you see it. No matter where there's clinging, you can be aware of it. It's only when you're aware of it that you can let it go.