

## *Relate Everything to the Breath*

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The breath is the basis of the skill we're trying to develop here—which means that when anything comes up in the course of the meditation, you want to try to relate it to the breath.

If there's a pain in the body, how is it related to the way you breathe? How is it related to the way you conceive of the breath? Because the mental image you have of the breathing process is going to influence how you actually breathe, which muscles get involved, and which muscles take a vacation. You may find that the way you breathe actually builds up tension in different parts of the body. Certain parts of the body you hold in a pattern of tension may lead to a blockage. The blood gets cut off; there are feelings of numbness, feelings of pain. You want to explore that possibility: This particular pain you've got right now, is it related to the breath or not?

The same with distracting thoughts: For a thought to take hold, there has to be a little bit of tension in the body someplace. It's your marker around which the thought can coalesce. So again, if you see a thought coming up, the first question is, how is this related to the breath energy in the different parts of the body? If you can find that little pattern of tension, that little kernel of tension, see if you can breathe through it and notice what that does to the thought. It's almost like shooting the thoughts down. Once the thought is out of the way, then you get back to your basic focal point, whichever spot in the body you've chosen as the one where you want to pay most attention to how the breathing feels.

It's wise to find a point that's really sensitive to the breathing process, one that you tend to starve. Often this can be in the throat, or it can be in the chest: the part of the body that you tend to tense up as you're paying attention to other things or you're holding a lot of stuff.

There was a West African shaman who came to the States one time and apparently he had some psychic abilities. He said he saw a lot of Westerners going around with big holes in their throats, areas of the energy body that weren't getting nourished. He attributed it to the fact that they were holding their sorrow in, and hadn't allowed themselves to express it. So explore the area around the throat, the area around the chest. As you breathe in, is it nourished? If it's not, what can you do to send a little extra energy in there? To what extent will it allow you to send energy in there? Sometimes there's a resistance.

But it's really useful to find a spot where you can give yourself some nourishment with the breath and it immediately appreciates it, it immediately feels good. From there you can spread that sense of feeling good around the body. As you get some immediate payback, that gives you more encouragement.

Because the state of concentration we're working on here is not one where you have to bear down on one spot so that you wipe out your awareness of everything else. You just want

to keep tabs on one area in the body continually and see how continually you can make it feel good, in the midst of your experience of the rest of the body. The more continuous your awareness at that spot, the more you can maintain that continuous feeling.

This also means learning how to focus on it in a way that feels good while you're focused. If your focus is too intense, that constricts the blood in that area, and you create another spot of tension, which you don't want. So think of the blood flowing fully to that area as you're focused on it—all the way through the in-breath, all the way through the out-. You're not straining to bring in the breath overly long and you're not squeezing the breath out as you breathe out. If the breath is going to go out, it's going to go out without your having to help it in any way.

As the Buddha said, there are certain sensations in the body that can provide a toehold for rapture—although the word rapture in Pali, *piti*, has a wider range of meanings than the English word rapture. It also means refreshment, a sense of fullness. See if you can find some spot in the body where as soon as you focus on it there's a sense of fullness. The muscles in the blood vessels relax; the blood is allowed to flow there fully. Then allow that sense of fullness to stay the same all the way through the in-breath, all the way through the out-. It may take a while for you to find which spot in the body is your spot, or which spots in the body are your spots for doing this. Once you've found them, it's really convenient, especially when you want to be able to get the mind to settle down and get a sense of refreshment quickly.

So you're not spending the whole hour here gradually settling down and just as you get settled in on the breath, the ring-tone comes to say it's the end. There's a part of the mind that tends to think in those ways: "I've got a whole hour to settle down, so let's take the whole hour to settle down." You can't think in those terms. You've got to say, "Here I am. It's time to settle down. Bang! Let's do it right now."

That means knowing how to focus in on a spot so that you're not putting too much pressure on it and you're not holding it too loosely. You're just gathering your awareness around that spot. Think of it gathering your awareness from the whole body, every little cell in your body has turned to look at that spot. You're protecting it to keep it full. Then, as that fullness comes, you allow it to spread so that all the little cells in the body get a sense of fullness, too.

Then the trick is simply maintaining that. And not wondering, "Well, what happens next?" What's going to happen next will develop on its own, if you give it a chance to develop.

Otherwise, it's like planting a plant and being concerned, "Are the roots getting long enough?" So you pull the plant out to see how long the roots are. And you put it back in the ground. Five minutes later, "Ah, are the roots long enough now?" You pull it out again. The plant's never going to have a chance to grow. Just keep watering the plant. The roots will grow without your having to know how they're going to grow or how quickly they're going to grow.

It's not a matter of your trying to determine everything in advance. After all, your ideas about where the practice is going to go or how quickly it should go are all based on ignorance.

You may have heard different things about how meditation should go. As they say, there's the discernment that comes from listening and the discernment that comes from thinking. But real knowledge comes with the discernment that comes from actually developing qualities of the mind. Because there's also ignorance that comes from listening and ignorance that comes from thinking. You read the words in the texts, and they mean one thing to you when you haven't practiced. After you've practiced a little bit more, they mean something else. If you put them away for a couple of months and then come back again, if you really have been practicing you'll find they'll mean something else again.

So don't try to determine beforehand how it's going to go. Your duty is to keep watering the plant, caring for it, looking after it. It'll do the developing. It'll grow its roots without having to consult with you where the roots should go. You just try to provide the right conditions, and it'll do its thing. It's the same with concentration. The concentration develops by your allowing it to just be here. You look after it and it's going to do the growing without your having to worry about how quickly it's going to grow or how tall or what direction it's going to go in—or how soon you're going to meet up with the first jhana, the second jhana, whatever. These things don't come with signposts.

The descriptions in the Canon, like the passages we chanted just now on right concentration, tell what it's going to be like, but they don't tell you how you're going to get there.

It's like the difference between restaurant reviews and recipes. The restaurant reviews say that this particular dish tasted good, this particular dish wasn't quite up to snuff. They'll talk about what a dish that would come up to snuff would be like. That's reading about the finished product. The recipe tells you what to do: how to beat the eggs, how to fold the egg whites in with the egg yolks or whatever, what temperature to set the oven. And the qualities that the restaurant reviewer is looking for either will or will not happen depending on how well you follow the recipe. They don't come about by following the restaurant review.

So you don't worry about what the descriptions are or when you're going to get into this level of insight or that level of concentration. Your task right now is to stay right here with the breath. And relate everything else that you're experiencing to the breath.

You're trying to take this as a frame of reference, a satipatthana, an establishing of mindfulness. Mindfulness doesn't get established if it keeps jumping around. So while you're with the breath, you will be aware of feelings but you want to relate the feelings to the breath. To be aware of mind states, you want to relate the mind states to the breath. Mental qualities that either help you, like the factors for awakening, or hinder you, like the hindrances: Relate those to the breath. What kind of breathing helps to induce mindfulness? How is analysis of qualities related to the breath?

Analysis of qualities means seeing which qualities in the mind are skillful and which ones are not. So what kind of breathing helps to bring about skillful mental qualities? What kind of

breathing gets in the way? And how do skillful mental qualities affect the way you experience the breath? Relate all these things back and forth in this way. Sometimes the breath influences mental qualities, and other times mental qualities are going to influence the breath.

The important thing is to stay connected to the breath all the time as you're exploring these issues. When the hindrances come up, what kind of breathing is related to sensual desire? If you find yourself drifting off into sensual desire, what kind of breathing can help get you out? When you're feeling restless and anxious, what kind of breathing can calm you? When you're feeling sleepy, what kind of breathing can wake you up?

It's not the case that, when you're focused on the breath, that's all you experience. Other things will come in, but you don't want to grasp at them. It's as if you're holding the breath in your hand. When feelings come along, you don't drop the breath to grab hold of the feelings. It's like allowing the feelings to brush against the back of your hand. You're still with the breath. You're aware of the feelings but the breath is your primary focus.

If you're going to do any analysis, you want to see how they're related. If you find that the analysis is too distracting, you just say, "Well, just stay with the breath." The feelings will be there but you don't have to figure them out. Don't give them your full attention. The breath gets the full attention.

This is how you become skilled in breath meditation: going on the assumption that whatever comes up, you want to relate it to the way you breathe, the way you experience the breath energy in the body, the way you conceive the breath energy in the body. Then use that knowledge to develop skillful qualities in the mind.