

Dhamma Medicine for Free

August 21, 2009

Take some good, long, deep in-and-out breaths, for as long and as deep as you can manage. How does it feel? If it feels good, keep it up. You want to get in touch with how the breathing element in your body, the breathing property in your body, has an impact on how you experience the body. Breathing deep and long is one good way of highlighting that. But when you reach the point where long breathing doesn't feel good, you can allow it to grow shorter. If deep breathing doesn't feel good, you let grow more shallow. The important thing is finding a way of breathing that really does feel good and nourishing for the body.

If you have a big knot of tension someplace in the body, for the time being just let it go. Work in the areas that do feel comfortable. Strengthen that sense of well-being, just being inside your own skin, being in your body. This is an important principle in the meditation. If the breath doesn't feel nourishing, you're going to be in trouble. The mind won't stay with the body, and the body itself will start getting tense, tight, uncomfortable.

You have to realize that a large part of the health of the body and the health of the mind, the well-being of the body, the well-being of the mind, depends on the breath. For the most part, we ignore this potential. We ignore this impact to our own peril. The good news here, though, is that it's free. The breath hasn't been privatized, at least not yet. Nobody can hold it back and sell it to you at a profit. The breath is coming in and going out all the time, so you can take advantage of that fact, both for the health of the body and for the health of the mind. This is called Dhamma medicine. It's free. But to work, it requires that you pay a lot of attention to it.

So if thoughts come up in the mind, you don't have to chase them away. Just stay right here with the breath. After all, those thoughts don't destroy your experience of the breath. And the breath is your anchor to the present moment. It keeps you in the body, keeps you right here, right now. If you spend your time chasing down your thoughts, or trying to push them away, you're not giving your full attention to the breath. Remind yourself that the mind is like a committee. There are lots of different voices in there, and you don't have to pay attention to every voice in the committee. Just listen to the voice that says: "Stay with the breath. Stay grounded in the breath."

Then have a little dialogue with yourself over how the breath feels. Is it too long or too short? How would you know if it were too long or too short? You can

experiment. Make it really long for a while; make it really short for a while. Then see what feels wrong with breath if it's too long or too short.

This way, you gain knowledge from within yourself that doesn't depend on anyone else. You learn to develop your own powers of evaluation, your powers of discernment, and you start using them for your own well-being. All too often, we spend a lot of time thinking about issues that deal with temporary happiness—or anything but true well-being, true happiness—and we get really distracted. So our discernment doesn't give us as much benefit as it could. For your discernment to benefit you, and for your breath to benefit you, bring them together. This way, the mind helps look after the body, and the body provides a good place for the mind to stay.

Ajaan Lee's image is of a house and the owner of the house. If the owner doesn't stay with the house, both sides suffer. The owner doesn't have a place to stay sheltered, constantly running around exposed to the sun and the rain and the wind. In the meantime, there's nobody looking after the house. Insects can move in. Animals can move in—raccoons are prowling around the monastery right now. Dry rot can set in. And the owner doesn't know, because the owner isn't there. If, however, the owner is living in the house, the owner benefits from the shelter and protection offered by the house. And the house itself now has someone looking after it. If insects move in, you can chase them out. If animals move in, you can chase them out. If any part of the house begins to wear down, you can fix it right away.

In other words, if you find there are pains in the different parts the body, or if patterns tension or tightness are beginning to build up, you can breathe in a way that helps disperse them, helps loosen them up. This way, the body has somebody looking after it all the time—someone who's right in the front lines, sensitive to these things as soon as they occur.

The first little ant that comes into the house, you notice it. Figure out where the ants are coming from, and then you get rid of them quickly. If you wait until the ant colony has moved in and established a nest someplace in the wall, then you're in real trouble. Or if the raccoons move in and they start shitting and pissing all over the house, again, you're in real trouble. So as soon as you hear the raccoon scratching at the door, you've got to make sure the raccoon can't open the door. In other words, you're right here to see what's happening as it's happening. You're not off someplace else. That way, the body has someone looking after it.

And as you're looking after it, it's a much better place to be. As soon as you focus on the breath, you can find a sense of well-being at least someplace in the body. As you get more and more familiar with the breath, you notice, "This kind

of breathing is too long; this is too short.” You know because you’ve been experiencing these things. You’ve been watching them, observing them, taking notes, developing a skill.

Ajaan Lee uses the word *vijja*, which means a combination of skill and knowledge that comes from experience and from experimenting. You learn the basic principles and then you apply them to what’s happening right here, right now, so that the skill becomes *your* skill, not just something you’re imposing on the body and the mind, but something that feels good from within.

That way, sitting here just breathing, if you do it with enough knowledge and enough skill, becomes a really pleasant experience—and it becomes a clarifying experience for the mind as well. As the Buddha pointed out with all the different factors of what’s called dependent co-arising that create suffering for the mind, all you have to do is to bring knowledge and awareness to any one of the factors, and you begin to develop knowledge and awareness of them all. And with that knowledge and awareness, you cut through the process that leads to craving, clinging, and then the suffering you experience. The things you’ve been clinging to begin to change.

It turns out that one of those factors in dependent co-arising is the breath. It’s called *kaya-sankhara*, bodily fabrication. It’s the intentional side of what’s going on in the body. You can’t exert any conscious control of your digestive processes or other processes going on in the body, but you do have some intentional control over the breath. So try to take advantage of that.

At the same time, there’s what’s called verbal fabrication, directed thought and evaluation: in other words, setting up a topic in your mind and then thinking about it, evaluating what you like and don’t like about what you’re thinking about. You focus your attention on what you’re thinking about, and you watch it, you evaluate it. You evaluate the breath.

As you do so, you get more and more sensitive to how the breathing energy feels. You’re more and more aware of this process.

Then there’s mental fabrication, feeling and perception. Feeling would be the feelings of ease or dis-ease associated with breath. Perception includes the mental labels, the images you have in your mind about the breath. When you breathe in, where do you think the breath comes in? When you breathe out, where does it go out? Is there one spot where comes in and out, or it can come in and out through all the pores of your body? If you find the breath feels difficult, think of the breath coming in and out different places from what you’ve been imagining so far. If you’re not really clear about how you’ve been imaging the breath to yourself, consciously create different images and see how they feel.

If you do all these processes—bodily fabrication, verbal fabrication, and mental fabrication—with as much knowledge as possible, that cuts through a lot of the suffering that would ordinarily develop around the breath. We don't think of there being much suffering around the breath, but if there's a sense of dis-ease in the body, it begins to spread into the way you relate to other things: the way you relate to your thoughts, impressions from outside, your dealings with people around you. Then these things begin to cause a lot of suffering. It all just snowballs.

Or it turns into a nuclear reaction: Everything blows up just from some simple unawareness, some simple ignorance of how you're breathing, what's going on in your body right now in terms of the breath, where your thoughts are right now, where your intentions are right now.

But you can intentionally change your perceptions. You can intentionally change the way you think about the breath and evaluate the breath. And you have some intentional control over the breath itself, so take advantage of these potentials. This is your Dhamma medicine sitting in the medicine chest, waiting to be used. If you don't use it, it just sits there. It's good medicine but it's not going to give any good effect unless you put it to use.

So learn to think in ways that give rise to a sense of well-being in the breath, in the mind, because you're going to need a sense of well-being not only as you go through the day, but also as you start digging into issues in the mind. You're going to run into a lot of things in the mind that you don't like. As soon as the mind is still, a lot of things come piling in. For the time being, you don't pay them any mind, don't pay them any attention. But you can't help but notice that there are issues in there: issues about your family, issues about your whole feeling about life, what you've done with your life, where you're going with your life, issues from the past, issues that you can anticipate in the future. They're issues because of your craving and clinging.

But now you're beginning to see that you crave and cling to things that you hadn't really realized before, some of which are quite embarrassing. One typical reaction is just to push them out of your mind and pretend they're not there. But they don't go away. They just stay hiding for a bit and then they come back out again when you the least expect them. So you want to put the mind in a place where it's okay with these things. It's not threatened by them. It can see them; it knows they're there. But you're not too impatient to push them away. You want to get the mind in good shape, get the body in good shape, so that you can then invite them into your space and say, "What's going on here? What are these

cravings and clingings all about?” You begin to sort through them. You see what misapprehension, what mis-assumptions lie behind them.

When you realize that they’re based on ignorance, they’re based on misunderstanding of things, then you can let them go. But you first have to understand them and see where they’ve gone wrong so that they lose their power. That’s going to take work. It’s going to take patience. It’s going to take strength.

So this is what the breath does, the Dhamma medicine of the breathing. As you perfect this skill and gain more proficiency in it, you find that you can develop the strength that’s needed to be patient, to be meticulous in understanding what’s going on in the mind, and you can deal with things effectively.

So don’t overlook this source of strength. As we chanted just now, you have to have respect for concentration, learning the skills that go along with the breath, so that it can give you the strength you need to help with the strength of discernment. Ultimately, you get the mind to the point where it doesn’t need to feed on anything anymore. It’s totally free from all its misapprehensions, misunderstandings, and there’s no more suffering.

So just this little process can take you far. And even if you don’t take it all the way, you gain lots of benefits however far you do go. As I said, this is free medicine. All it requires is that you pay a lot of attention, be observant, and be honest with yourself about what’s going on.

That’s what the Buddha set up as a basic prerequisite for practice: One is that you be honest and, two, that you be observant. Everything else flows from there.