

## *Serenity*

*September 5, 2011*

Take some good long deep in-and-out breaths. Get a sense of what kind of breath energy your body needs right now. If you're feeling tired, you may need some energizing breath: long in, short out seems to help that way—or whatever way of breathing you find that gives more energy to the body.

If you're feeling tense, try to breathe in a way that's more relaxing: short in, long out can help—or whatever way you find helps to calm the body down, calm the mind down, helps to give rise to a sense of serenity and ease.

This quality of serenity or calm is one of the factors of awakening. As you remember, there are two sides to the factors of awakening: There are those that are energizing and those that are calming. Serenity is the first of the calming factors.

You can develop it in two ways. In fact, you want both kinds of serenity, i.e., bodily serenity and mental serenity.

For bodily serenity, you work with the breath. Remember the Buddha's instructions that once you're aware of long breathing and short breathing, try to make yourself aware of the whole body and then notice the effect that the breath is having on the body. Then try to make that effect more serene, make it more refined. Try to breathe in a way that's gentle to the body. This helps to calm things down within the body. All the different processes calm down. Whatever tightness you may feel here or there in the body: Think of it dissolving away.

If there's a sense that the breathing requires a lot of effort, just remind yourself: The breath is going to come in and out on its own. There are pores all over your body. You don't have to pull it in or push it out. The breath will come in naturally, go out naturally. Any perception you can hold in mind that helps to make the breath easier: Experiment to see what way of picturing the breath to yourself helps to make the process of breathing more serene.

At the same time, you want to develop mental serenity as well. Calm the mind down. This also has to do with your perceptions but it's more a matter of your perceptions of how things are going in your life. Any perception that allows you to let things go at least for the time being: Hold on to that perception. Let go of concerns for your work, your family, the world at large. You can't be responsible for everybody 24/7. You've got to have time for yourself. And realize that the world will probably run perfectly fine without you. You're going to have to let it go someday anyhow, so practice letting go now.

In this way, you make the body more serene and the mind more serene at the

same time. These are qualities that help give rise to concentration.

Another way of making the mind more serene is to develop the brahmaviharas, the sublime attitudes: immeasurable goodwill, immeasurable compassion, immeasurable empathetic joy, immeasurable equanimity. These thoughts are soothing to the mind.

In the beginning, you have to work through them. Ask yourself, “Is there anybody out there for whom you cannot feel goodwill?” And certain faces will probably appear in your mind. You have to remind yourself: Nobody benefits from seeing those people suffer. Often, if they suffer, they come back and get more vengeful. So it’s not going to help the world in any way at all to wish for their suffering, to wish them ill will.

The same with compassion: There are plenty of people out there suffering and there are also people who are creating the causes for suffering. You have to have compassion for both. And when you realize that, and you *can* have compassion even for the people who are creating suffering, that takes a lot of the edge off your inability to let go of the world. It allows you to put things down for the time being.

The same with empathetic joy: Is there anybody out there or whose good fortune you can’t feel happy? Again, realize that your being jealous of their good fortune doesn’t help. Or your feeling that it’s not right that they’ve got that good fortune: You have to remember that some place in the past they must have done something right. Think about yourself: Maybe someday you’re going to come into good fortune. Do you want other people around you to be jealous? Well, no.

And remember that empathetic joy isn’t just for people who are experiencing good fortune. It’s also for people who are creating the causes for good fortune, creating the causes for happiness. Whether they’re experiencing that happiness yet, you rejoice in the fact that they’re doing good. That’s a calming thought. It helps make the mind more serene.

Then, of course, there’s equanimity, realizing that each of us is the owner of his or her own actions. There’s only so much in this world that you can exert any control over at all. The prime thing you can exert control over is your own mind. It’s by working on your mind that you’re going to help other things. Focus your attention here, and the effects will spread out—which means you can begin to let go of a lot of your concerns for things out there, the things you can’t control. To whatever extent you *can* control things, that comes under your ability to train the mind well right now. This helps to focus you in, it helps you put other things aside.

You can reflect on your own virtue, you can reflect on your own generosity.

These are calming thoughts as well: realizing that even though your virtue may not be perfect, you've got at least *some* good things that you've done in your past. Your generosity may not be perfect, but there are areas where you've helped other people: either through material gifts or gifts of your time, gifts of your forgiveness, gifts of your knowledge.

All of these ways of thinking are ways of helping get the mind more serene so that it's able to settle down in the present moment with a sense of well-being. This sense of well-being is important because concentration requires it. It's an important part of the path.

Sometimes you hear people saying that you've got to beware of getting stuck on the sense of pleasure or bliss or well-being that can come with concentration. But the Buddha reminds us that this kind of well-being is blameless. There are so many ways that people have of looking for pleasure outside that are *not* blameless at all—that cause trouble for themselves, cause trouble for other people.

But this form of well-being is skillful. It's worth developing. The danger of getting stuck here is extremely minor compared to the dangers of looking for your pleasure elsewhere. Because the nature of the mind is that it wants pleasure. If it can't find it inside, it's going to go looking outside. If you can't produce your own food, you're going to go looking for food from other people. Of course you know what you get from them mainly is, as Ajaan Lee says, the food they spit out, the words they spit out. That's not good eating at all.

As long as the mind is going to look for pleasure, learn how to create it inside in a way that's blameless, in a way that's skillful. It's normal that, as you're working on this and you find that you are getting results, there will be a certain amount of attachment, there will be a certain amount of clinging. That's all part of developing the skill. It's what keeps you interested in this, working at it, allowing it to capture your imagination.

As with so many other aspects of the path, you cling to it for a while and then when it's done its work, you learn how to let it go. Because if you don't have this to hold on to... Remember it's part of the raft. If you're not holding on to the raft, what's happening to you? You're falling into the river and getting washed away.

The sense of ease, well-being, serenity of concentration is a really important part of the practice. Your ability to induce it is one of the really necessary skills, so that the mind isn't sneaking out and trying to find its food someplace else. So don't be afraid of this ease; don't be afraid of this pleasure. Learn how to use it. It's healing for the body; healing for the mind. And it is one of the necessary factors for awakening. So learn how to give rise to it, learn how to maintain it, learn how to use it. Because it's an important skill in your repertoire.