

Generating Energy

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In Thailand they sometimes compare practicing meditation to flying a kite. It takes a fair amount of effort to get the kite up in the air, until it finally catches the wind, but then it doesn't take much effort anymore. The energy of the practice, at that point, keeps feeding itself.

Now, in Thai, the phrase “catching the wind,” is actually a play on words. Because the word for “wind” and the word for “breath” are the same word, lom. So when you practice, when you finally get to the breath, and it feels easiest to stay with the breath, that's when you've caught the wind. The practice picks up its own momentum. The tricky part, of course, is getting the kite up into the air, getting to the point where the energy you put into the practice gets less and less, and the practice itself produces the energy you need.

It's something you'll find at various stages in the practice—it doesn't simply happen once and for all—that you catch the wind and then have no more problems. Sometimes the kites will fall down, and you have to get them back up in the air. So it's good to know some ways of generating energy so that you'll be able to get things up in the air, to catch the wind again.

When the Buddha discusses persistence in the five strengths, it builds on conviction. That's one of the mental ways of giving rise to more energy. Another is in the context of the seven factors for awakening, where persistence builds on mindfulness: keeping something in mind. So what are the ways of giving rise to conviction that are going to energize you, and what are the things you have to keep in mind that will give rise to more energy?

In the seven factors for awakening, the Buddha talks about qualities that act as a foothold for the energy or the potential for energy, but then he doesn't explain what they are. This is where you have to look around in yourself. This is also where you have to learn from others—that's the part you have to keep in mind.

It essentially comes down to two sorts of sources: sources within the mind and sources within the body. In terms of the body, you may want to look at the way you're breathing, because there are some very peaceful and calm ways of breathing that actually deplete the energy in your body. So if you find that your energy level is low, what can you do to change the way you breathe? Try to notice which parts of the body seem to be overworked, the ones that are doing all the work in the breathing, but don't seem to be getting any refreshment from the breath. Consciously relax those parts and say: If the body is going to breathe in, other parts will have to take over, but these parts are going to stay relaxed, regardless. And you'll find that other parts of the body will pitch in. Watch that for a while. See if the way they're breathing actually does improve the energy in the body.

Sometimes you have to remind yourself that the body is, as you directly experience it from within, all breath. Whatever sensation comes up, think of it as an aspect of breath energy, and then ask yourself: Is that healthy breath energy or not? If it were healthy, what would it feel like? Because sometimes you hold in mind the perception that a sensation is solid, and you put up with all kinds of stuff from solidity that you wouldn't put up with if you thought this was breath. Then conversely, there are times when you feel a need for something really solid and grounding to get your energy going. So you have to play with your perceptions here, to see which perceptions of what's going on in the body can actually be helpful.

There are parts of the body that you may be suppressing, that could actually be a source of energy. Ajaan Lee talks of the breath that goes up the spine, and the breath that goes up the centerline in the front of the torso. Do you have any room for that kind of breath energy in your concept of the way you breathe? Or do you squash it? Or when you're feeling tired, which parts of the body are you focusing on as feeling tired? Then check to see which parts are actually okay. Switch your perception around to the parts that are okay. See what that does.

In other words, realize that there are pockets of energy in the body—and not just in the body, all around you. Ajaan Lee talks about the elements that surround the body and can give nourishment to it. Sometimes these elements can come into the different chakras, or the different resting points of the breath, as Ajaan Lee calls them. Think of an energy outside the body coming in and nourishing the point in the middle of the chest, nourishing the point in the middle of your head, any point that seems to need extra energy. Tap into the energies around you. There are some good ones. Learn how to recognize the good ones that feel refreshing as soon as you allow them in.

So there are potentials there that you may not have thought about. And it's good to remember that there are those possibilities there. That's what mindfulness is for.

As for energy that comes from the mind, the Buddha talks about gladdening the mind: thinking about topics that give rise to a sense of inspiration. These can be the Buddha, the Dhamma, or the Sangha, your own generosity, your own virtue. Sometimes putting the breath aside for the time being and thinking about these things can be very helpful. Thinking about the Sangha for instance: Think about all the ajaans and the success they had in the practice. Remember that they were human beings, you're a human being. They could do it, you can do it. This is the message they always give.

One of the purposes of this is to dig out any attitudes you may be holding that are actually harmful, that actually sap your energy—such as the attitude that “I probably won't be able to get anywhere in this lifetime. I'll just muddle around a little bit, and I hope that things will go better next time around.” Ask yourself if part of your mind is holding onto that. And why would it want to hold onto that? It might be that it doesn't want to put out too much effort, or you don't want to set the bar too high. But what you're doing as you set the bar low is beating yourself down with the bar. If you're more open to the possibility that, Yes, you could attain one of the noble attainments in this lifetime, does that energize you? Does it scare you? Look into that.

Another contemplation that can give rise to energy is the contemplation of death: realizing that you don't know when death is going to come, or how it's going to come. All these prophecies have been floating around about the year 2012, the end of the world, the reverse of the magnetic poles or whatever. But you may not even live to see the end of the world. Something might happen before then. This is not meant to get you depressed. It's meant to motivate you to realize that important things need to be done in the mind right now. If aging, illness and death come—or, rather, when they come—what qualities of mind are you going to need?

You see some people as they approach death, and they just get totally thrown off balance. They can't even allow themselves to think about the future, for the future holds nothing but an empty blank for them. And if they had a bad past, that's something they don't want to think about either. I think this is one of the reasons that dementia often flares up as death approaches. You don't know where to focus your mind. Well, if you have a meditation practice, you know you can focus right here at the breath. Maintain this awareness of the present moment so that the mind doesn't go flailing around. You're going to need mindfulness, you're going to need alertness, you're going to need as much concentration and discernment as you can muster.

And when are you going to develop those qualities if you don't develop them now? Right now is an ideal opportunity. You're sitting here meditating. It's quiet around you. One of the contemplations the Buddha has the monks reflect on—and it's one of the ones King Asoka recommended in one of his edicts—is to think about future dangers. Aging, illness, and death can come; social unrest can come; a split in the Sangha can come. If you tell yourself, “Well, I'll just wait until my next lifetime,” he warns that the Dhamma and the Vinaya are going to deteriorate over time. The opportunities don't get better. They get worse. So you make use of the opportunities you have now. In this case, you're motivating yourself with a little bit of fear: the wise kind of fear, the fear that's related to compunction and heedfulness.

So it's up to you to observe what you need to think about to motivate yourself to practice. Sometimes you need the positive side of the encouragement, so you hold out a

carrot. But sometimes you need the stick to remind yourself that if you don't do the work now, it's not going to get easier. They've done studies of people who are really expert in physical skills and they've discovered that these people have the ability to motivate themselves using both types of motivation: a strong sense of the harm that can be done if you don't master the skill, and a strong sense of the benefits that can come when you do. So you have to learn how to deal with your own mind, and when one method of motivation isn't working, remember you've got other possibilities, other choices, other tools in your kit.

What it comes down to is that you try to find sources of energy in the body, and sources of energy in the way you think, that you can then channel into your mindfulness, alertness, and concentration, that give more ardency to the practice, so that the kite can get up in the air. Ideally when your energy turns into right effort, one of the results is rapture: refreshment, a sense of well-being that then becomes food for the concentration. This is when the kite finally catches the wind. You're focused on the breath in the way that gives rise to a sense of fullness, and then you feed off of that, so that you can stay with it more consistently, with a greater sense of solidity, stability.

So remember that right effort is not just a matter of brute force. It requires your ingenuity and your intelligence, your ability to find sources of energy that you've overlooked or that you've been squashing. Look at the way you think, look at the way you breathe, look at the way you hold your body. See if there's anything you can change. Any ways of thinking that are keeping you down, learn to question them. Any ways of breathing that are stifling your energy, just drop them. Ask yourself: Which parts of the body are getting starved of energy? Where is some energy in another part of the body that can help nourish them? If it can't be found in the body, remind yourself there's energy around the body, so tap into that.

This is what mindfulness is good for: to remember that you've got these potential sources. Don't forget them. The skill lies in learning how to put them to use, so that the kite gets up into the wind, and the energy can feed on itself to keep the practice going, making it steadier and more reliable, with mindfulness feeding your persistence, and persistence feeding your mindfulness. That way, both of them do become what they call dominant factors in the mind.