

Brahmaviharas & the Breath

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Ajaan Lee, in all of his guides to meditation, would talk about how you have to start out with thoughts of goodwill—in fact, all the *brahmaviharas*: goodwill, compassion, empathetic joy, and equanimity—as preparation for settling down with the breath. But he would also comment occasionally on how, when you’re developing thoughts, especially of goodwill, if there’s no sense of well-being inside, it’s like turning on the faucet to a water tank that has no water in it at all. Nothing but air comes out. And even though air may be cool, it doesn’t provide the same sense of refreshment as water.

In other words, when you’re wishing goodwill to others that they be happy, you have to have a sense of well-being inside. The best way to develop that is with the breath: getting the mind to settle down and develop a sense of ease with the breath, comfort with the breath, and then learning what to do with that comfort.

First, you adjust the rhythm of the breathing. You focus on one spot in the body to see how the breath feels at that spot and then you breathe in a way that gives rise to a sense of ease there. You’re not pinching the breath off, either at the end of the in-breath or at the end of the out-breath. Think of the ends of the breath as being wide open and you’re floating in between. When there’s a sense of ease there, you allow it to spread through the body.

Stay with the breath. Think of the breath energy spreading throughout the body, and try to get sensitive to the levels of breath energy. There’s the in-and-out breath, and there’s the energy that flows through the nerves and the blood vessels, which moves hopefully in conjunction with the in-and-out breath and doesn’t fight with it. Then there’s a very still energy that doesn’t move at all; it’s energy but it’s still. So you’ve got at least three levels.

Work with that middle level. Allow your awareness to spread through the body, and see how the subtle breath energy feels in the different parts of the body. It’s already there. Your awareness is already there, too, but your conscious awareness is not fully spread throughout the body. So you’re trying to meld your conscious awareness with the basic awareness that’s already there, in the same way that you’re trying to connect the breath—the energy of the in-and-out breath and the sense of well-being caused by the in-and-out breath—with the breath energy that’s already there.

Go down the back out the legs, down the shoulders out the arms, throughout the torso and the different parts of the head, and notice if there are any patterns of

tension or tightness anywhere that are keeping the breath flow from being smooth and at ease. Also notice if different parts of the body seem to be fighting with one another. Sometimes the breath energy, as you breathe in, is going down in one part of the body and up in another part, which is okay as long as they're not running into each other. If you find that they're running into each other, there's going to be some disturbance.

Think of the whole thing breathing in together, breathing out together. What you're doing is using some intelligence around pleasure. Our normal tendency, when dealing with pleasure, tends to go in one of two ways. Either we just want to wallow in the pleasure, or else we feel that we don't deserve it: We feel that it's dangerous, that we have to stay away from it. Neither attitude is intelligent. If you wallow in the pleasure, you lose the breath. And when you lose the breath, you lose the cause for the actual sense of pleasure, so it will dissipate. But if you're afraid of the pleasure, how are you going to get any sense of well-being? How are you going to get any sense of strength in your path? And when you're developing thoughts of goodwill, how can you sincerely wish goodwill for other beings, "May they all be happy," when you yourself are afraid of happiness and pleasure?

It's nothing to be afraid of, but at the same time, it's not there for you to wallow in. The reason we're afraid of it is that we feel bad about having wallowed in it in the past and having lost it. But if you take an intelligent attitude toward it, you realize it's something you can use as a basis both for settling down comfortably in the present moment and for developing strong concentration, the kind of concentration where your awareness fills the whole body in a way that's all-around.

This is important. If your concentration is one-pointed, there are huge blind spots, and all kinds of things can happen in the blind spots. So you want your awareness to be centered but radiating out in all directions. A sense of well-being that comes with the breath as it flows smoothly is a real help in this area. At the same time as you're trying to develop and maintain an attitude of unlimited goodwill, this gives you a foundation. It provides the water in that water tank.

This way, when you send thoughts of goodwill to others, it really does have power. And there's a sincerity that comes with that. You've got a sense of well-being you'd like others to share, to enjoy that same sense of well-being. Of course, they can't come in and take a bite out of your pleasure; you can't offer it to them. *But* the attitude of your mind feeding on this can send an energy in their direction that's cooling to them.

Of course, your thoughts of goodwill on their own are not enough to provide them with a solid sense of well-being. But there have been many cases where, at

the very least, people can feel that someone is spreading goodwill in their direction. They may not know where it's coming from or may be only half-conscious of what's happening—but it's there.

In the meantime, your attitude gets stronger because goodwill is a fabricated thing. It's not the nature of the mind to wish goodwill to all beings. If you're feeling miserable, it's hard to wish goodwill to certain people. You might have goodwill for some people, but not for others. That's the normal human condition.

Universal goodwill is something that's fabricated. You have to put it together. And how do you fabricate attitudes? There are three kinds of fabrication and they all have to work together. There's mental fabrication where you think about things through your perceptions. You hold certain perceptions in mind, like the perception of goodwill, or that you would want to spread goodwill to others, or that you yourself would benefit from it. But there also has to be a feeling of well-being to have that impact on the mind.

This is where physical fabrication comes in. You can work with the breath and get a sense of well-being that comes from the way you breathe. That provides a really good support for the mental fabrication.

In the middle, there's verbal fabrication, where you're thinking about the breath, evaluating the breath. You're also thinking about others and evaluating what it is to have genuine goodwill. You realize that your thoughts are not magic wands that will create happiness everywhere. Genuine happiness has to come from action. So what you're wishing is that people would act in ways that give rise to genuine happiness. That requires that they also understand something about how to find genuine happiness within.

So use your directed thought and evaluation in both directions: working with the breath and also working with your attitude for goodwill and the other *brahmaviharas*. It's in this way that meditating on the breath, developing strong feelings of well-being as you work with the breath, is very intimately connected with developing the *brahmaviharas*.

We use the *brahmaviharas* to get ourselves in the right attitude to begin our formal meditation to clear the decks—to make sure you don't have any lingering ill will for someone you may have picked up during the course of the day. That kind of goodwill is basically for you, to get yourself ready to meditate. Then as you meditate and develop this sense of well-being inside, it strengthens your thoughts of goodwill. They really do become thoughts that are for the purpose of motivating your actions as you deal with other people when you leave meditation—and providing a generally good energy field that people will pick up.

I remember reading a story years back. A woman had gone to a meditation class in New York City after having gone to an art class. So she had her abstract painting with her, and she'd just come out of meditation. She was sitting on the subway, alone in one of the subway cars, and this group of tough, young kids came in. They saw her abstract painting and they started taunting her. "What is this—this crap here? This doesn't look like anything."

She looked at them, and all she could see was how much they were suffering. She felt an immense goodwill for them, immense compassion. So without even having any thought of fear at all, she started explaining her painting to them. It was the power of her goodwill that really impressed the kids. When she finished, they said, "Thank you very much, ma'am. No one's ever explained this to us before." And they walked on.

So there is a power to goodwill even though you may not find that your wish for all beings to be happy gets carried out. In fact, it's very unlikely that all beings will find happiness right away. But you find that if you really do genuinely have a secure sense of well-being inside—which you get from working with the breath—your goodwill for others will have a lot more power: a more visceral effect on the people around you. That's why these two practices always have to go together.