

At Home with the Breath

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One of the Buddha's terms for concentration is *vihāra-dhamma*, a home for the mind. It's like that definition of home in the Robert Frost poem: "Home is the place where, when you go there, they have to take you in." The breath is the object; it's the primary *vihāra-dhamma*. When the mind settles there, the breath has to take it in.

You can watch someone else breathing, but it's not nearly the same as the experience of your own breath. Sometimes the question arises: Are you doing it right? Are you relating to your breath in the right way? It's always good to remember that there's nobody there watching you, telling you that your breathing is bad. You're entirely free to choose whatever kind of breathing you want, whatever kind of breathing you like. The one catch, of course, is that sometimes you like a certain kind of breathing but after a while you begin to realize that it doesn't feel so good any more. Well, you're free to change then, too.

The important thing is that you're willing to learn. That should always be your purpose in sitting down to meditate. "I'm here to learn": That's the attitude that'll help you progress. Sometimes you learn some things that you don't like or didn't expect, but that doesn't mean the meditation didn't work. You tried something out, and it didn't work the way you wanted it to. Well, you remember that. That's how you develop skill.

In our society, we have lots of people who don't have that many physical or manual skills. As a result, we tend to miss a lot of the character traits that go along with developing a manual skill: the willingness to try, try, try again and not just try in the sense of batting your head against the wall. You try and then you try to notice. "I did it this way and it didn't work. Okay, how about something else?" How about trying it with the breath longer? How about focusing in another part of the body? All kinds of things you can do—and your inner sense of the body is your playground.

It's good to think of it that way, as a playground. Ajaan Fuang would often say, "Play with your meditation. Do it playfully." In other words, you're serious about it; you do want to do it well, but at the same time, you don't want to be grim. And you don't want to be afraid: Am I doing it right? Am I doing it wrong? One of the important things about the meditation is that gradually you will develop your own sense of what's right and what's wrong. If at the beginning you have any doubts, you remind yourself that you're still a beginner. If you start getting down

on yourself, telling yourself, “I’ve been at this for quite a while but I still seem to be a beginner,” remember that comment from Michelangelo. I think he was 87 years old and he said he was still learning how to be a sculptor. We’re always learning, if we have the right attitude.

After all, this is going to be your home. You want to make it a place where you’d like to be. So ask yourself, what kind of breathing feels good in the stomach? What kind of breathing feels good down in the intestines? How about the shoulders, the arms, down to the fingers, the spaces between the fingers? How about the sense of breath energy surrounding the body like a cocoon? Can you sense that? If you don’t sense it, you can ask yourself: How would you imagine it might feel? And assuming that there is a breath energy cocoon around you, does it feel like it’s a good cocoon? Or are there parts that seem to be out of balance, distorted?

Working with the breath this way, working with your mind in the present this way, gives you a lot of experience in line that big question: What’s skillful? What’s not skillful? You realize there’s only one way to learn—by experimenting. So take an experimental attitude toward the meditation. Try to be at home with the fact that you’re experimenting. Way too many people come to the meditation afraid that there’s a right and a wrong way of doing it, and they’re going to get it wrong from the beginning and that they’ll be penalized for not getting it right. But again, there’s nobody here keeping score, there’s nobody giving you a grade, and you’re not meditating to please anybody. You’re doing it because you suffer. You lack a sense of home, and you want to provide a home for yourself. Well, this is the place to do it, and this is the time to do it.

Just learn to have the patience to be observant. When the Buddha was teaching Rahula breath meditation, even though breath meditation involves a lot of training—in other words, you train yourself to be sensitive to the whole body; you train yourself to allow the breath energy to calm down or have the effect of the breath in the body to calm down; you train yourself to breathe in a way that maximizes the potentials for refreshment and pleasure—but before doing that, the Buddha said, try to make your mind like earth: non-reactive.

That’s so that you can be a good observer. It’s not that you just sit there and accept whatever comes up and say, “Well, this is the way it is. I’m just going to accept the way it is and leave it there.” You want to observe: “Okay, what am I doing?” Experience is not a given. We’re doing a lot to shape our experience right now, and the only way you’re going to notice how you shape it is to try shaping it in different ways. Then if you fall back to some of your old ways, you begin to notice. It’s like going to another country and learning another language, then

coming back and realizing, “Oh! Speaking in English in America is strange in this way.” You see the things that you used to take for granted in a new light. You may be breathing in a different way, having a different sense of the breath and then, if you find yourself falling back to your old ways, you say, “Oh *that’s* what I was doing wrong.” Or, “That’s how I was creating unnecessary suffering for myself.” You don’t see things unless you change them.

So you want to settle in and have a sense of feeling at home, at ease with the fact that you’re experimenting. You’re going to make some mistakes, but mistakes are expected. In one of Ajaan Mun’s few talks that was recorded—people took notes in those days; they didn’t have tape recorders, but people sometimes would take notes on his talks—he was talking about how it’s to be expected that you’re going to do things wrong at the beginning. You’re going to put too much pressure in one way; you’re going to be too lax in another way. But it’s only by exploring the range of being wrong that you begin to discover what’s right.

There are a lot of areas that the Buddha warns you ahead of time that you don’t experiment with *this*. For example, don’t experiment with breaking the precepts. But you can experiment with long breathing, short breathing, goodwill as a meditation topic, contemplation of the body as a meditation topic. Ajaan Lee often taught that the breath is your best home base; the other topics are like tools you bring in when you need to work on specific issues. But you always need the breath as your default mode, as the home to which you return. And having a safe place like this, a sense of being strong and having this as your territory: That makes you safe to other people as well, because when your actions come from a sense of strength, you don’t lash out. You don’t react in fearful ways. You know you’ve got your home here, and nobody can take it from you.

It’s important, though, that you learn how to inhabit the body fully. Don’t leave any openings for other people to broadcast their energy into your body or for you to suck it in. Sometimes we just seem to absorb other people’s energies. That’s not helpful. You want this to be your space and yours alone. One of the images in the Canon is of a wooden door. You throw a ball of string at the wooden door and it doesn’t penetrate. The wooden door stands for mindfulness immersed in and filling the body—your awareness filling the body.

You want this to be your place. Then when you have your place and no one else can enter into it, it’s a lot easier to be magnanimous. It’s a lot easier to be generous. It’s a lot easier to be less grasping because you don’t feel threatened. You have a safe sense of wealth inside.

So learn to feel at home here. If it seems like new territory, be at home with the fact that you’re going to learn how to like it. And you’re going to learn how to

adjust it so that it really is likeable. Your likes and dislikes are going to change as you meditate. Be at home with that fact, too. Be at home with the fact that this is going to develop into some interesting directions that you may not expect.