

## *Committed to the Breath*

*January 10, 2014*

We've all read enough on physiology to know where the breath comes in, where it goes out, but as you're sitting here right now, where do you *feel* the breathing? What parts of the body are engaged in the breathing process? Focus your attention on those sensations—your direct experience of the breath energy—and commit yourself to it for the hour. Whatever other little worlds of thought may come through the mind, just let them go, let them go. Try to keep everything anchored right here. Really commit yourself to staying here—because it's only when you stay here for long periods that you really see and observe things, both in the breath and in the mind. This is a skill, a topic that's really worth committing yourself to. After all, it is your breath. You're not committing yourself to anything far away or unseen. You're committing yourself to the energy that's keeping the body and the mind together—the question being: “What am I already doing with the energy, and what better things can be done with this energy?”

As we all know from the Buddha's analysis of how we all cause suffering, there's a lot of activity that goes on even before we experience something a sight or a sound. The mind fabricates its way of approaching things, its way of thinking about the breath, thinking about feelings, perceptions, thinking about thoughts. To put an end to suffering, we have to see those processes. The best place to look, from the very beginning, is at the breath. It's near the mind, but it's not directly at the mind.

I remember, years back, reading a Tibetan lama saying that the breath is a very poor object for meditation, because what happens when you die? You won't be able to focus on the breath—you should focus directly on the mind. Well, focusing on the mind is like observing wildlife. If you stare at a deer or stare at any wild animal, they're going to run away. So, you have to look at them out of the corner of your eye, pretend like you're not paying them any attention; you're not the least bit interested in them. And then they'll start behaving normally. It's the same with the mind. If you focus directly on it, it stops doing whatever it was doing for a while. It doesn't let you see very much.

If you want to observe your mind, observe it in the process of watching the breath, playing with the breath, exploring the breath. That way you really get to know it. And be willing to spend time here. This takes a lot of time, to see

anything really clearly. To see anything new and unusual, something other people might not have seen, you've to stay with it, again, and again and again.

I've got a student who's a professional photographer, and she was saying the other day that when she goes to a new place, she spends a whole month taking all the obvious photos, and ends up throwing most of them away. The really interesting photos are the ones that come after having been in a place for a long period of time. And the same principle applies here—when you watch the breath, you first notice the in and the out, and a few other qualities, but to really get to know it, you have to come back, back and back, again and again and again.

Ajaan Lee's image is of a path that you walk over, back and forth, back and forth, back and forth, until you really know it, you know every blade of grass—to the point where, if anything changes, you notice it immediately. That's the kind of familiarity you want to develop with the breath, because the mind, as it begins to settle down with the breath, moves in very subtle ways, and to see the subtleties, you have to be really familiar with the territory.

It's not that this path saves all of its benefits until the end. As you get familiar with the breath, you can deal with illnesses as they come up. You can deal with pains in the body. When the mind is feeling anxious, you can figure out ways to breathe to calm it down. When you're feeling tired, you can breathe in ways that give you more energy. So there are a lot of uses for the breath, now and on into the future. The skills that you develop around the breath are really useful skills, and they're skills that can help you all the way through life.

My father was a carpenter, and over the years he got to be a really good joiner. He made really nice furniture, and his shop was his escape. When he was tired of being in the house, tired of the people in the house, he'd go down to the shop. He was in his own world there, working with the wood. But then, he developed Parkinson's and he couldn't work in the shop anymore. Suddenly, he didn't have his escape, and you could see the change in his mental state when his body didn't allow him his escape anymore. But when you're working with the breath, you're working with something that's going to be with you until you die, and it's right next to the mind, which is why, as I said earlier, it's a good place to focus, so you can observe the mind out of the corner of your eye. Catch it doing things, fabricating thoughts, thinking things, planning things, remembering things, twisting things in its own way. That way, you can see through a lot of its subterfuges. The breath gives you a good solid place to stay, right next to the mind, to watch it.

So try to get familiar with the subtleties of the breath. Ajaan Lee talks about many levels of the breath: There's the in-and-out breathing; there's the sense of energy that flows through the body, in tandem with the in-and-out breathing—in other words, the energy that flows through the different muscles involved in the rise and fall of the ribcage, the rise and fall of the shoulders, subtle movements of the head. And as you get more familiar with it, you realize that it's spreading all the way down to the tips of your fingers and the tips of your toes. Then there's another level of breath energy that's even more refined, which is very still. It doesn't move with the in-breath, it doesn't move with the out-breath, but it is a kind of energy. These are the kinds of things you get to see when you stick with the breath. Commit yourself to staying here, so that you're not just taking the obvious photographs—you're seeing the details that are really special.

Of course, the details aren't just there in the breath. They're also related to the movements of the mind. When you catch yourself telling yourself something that you don't really believe, and yet you've been falling for it for who knows how long—when you see that in action, and can drop it... or any activity in the mind that has an influence on your thoughts, words, and deeds, but it's an influence because it's acting behind the scenes: When you're here—right here—this is where things are happening. And when you can see through those sorts of things, huge burdens get lifted. You begin to see the stories that you create around things. It can often be a huge problem. You may have decided that they're really, really true, but then you ask yourself, "Why do I have to tell myself these stories? Why do I have to get involved?"

You're much better off just allowing the breath to surround you. Remember: You're not on one side of the body watching the breath in another side of the body, you're in the midst of the breath. Allow yourself to sink down into the breath; allow it to enfold you. Develop an all-around awareness like this, and you'll be able to use that all-around awareness with the mind as well.

So this is a good skill to give yourself to. It gives you benefits right now, and on into the future—and it will stick with you. If you stick with it, it will stick with you, and it'll do all kinds of good things for you. It's one area in life where commitment really pays off.