

Deconstruct Your Emotions

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Try to inhabit your whole body. Think of where your feet are, your hands, your legs, your arms, your torso, your head. How do you sense these things? It's through the breath energy in the nerves, going through the blood vessels, going through the muscles: All of this comes under the category of breath. And it's related to the in-and-out breath.

So, look at the in-and-out breath, too. How does it feel? What kind of breathing would feel really good right now? What would energize your torso? What would nourish the muscles around the heart? In what way is the energy flowing through the body?

Ajaan Lee talks about the down-flowing energy and the up-flowing energy. The terms actually come from the Canon. His interpretation is that when you breathe in, sometimes there's the sense of the energy going from the head down to the feet. At other times, it comes from the feet up the spine into the head. What kind of breathing do you need right now? If you're feeling wired, you may want to think of the energy going down. If your energy level is down, think of it coming back up. Just make sure it doesn't get stuck in the head. If you find that there's pressure building up in the head, check to see if the muscles in the back of the neck are relaxed and also look at the muscles around your throat in the front and going down into the heart. Think of all those muscles being relaxed and wide open. Maintain that perception long enough for the energy to balance out.

This sort of exploration is something you have to do on your own—because we all sense our breath energy in different ways. And it gets out of balance in different ways.

You want to reclaim it for several reasons. One, it helps get you into the body, to develop that whole-body awareness where there's a sense of ease that you can knead through the body the same way that you would knead moisture through a ball of dough. That helps get you into concentration.

Two, it sensitizes you to things going on in the mind that you might miss otherwise. Some people think of concentration as being a blocking out—and even though there are certain things that you're blocking out right now, you do have to become very sensitive to the energy in the body. And that's directly related to things coming up in the mind. It's your first line of defense when a strong emotion suddenly appears. If you're really sensitive to what's going on in the body, you can detect the emotion before it's strong. That helps you to deal with it right

there before it overwhelms you.

Three, the breath energy is part of what's called bodily fabrication. It's one of the three kinds of fabrication that go into creating an emotion. Here in the West in particular we have the belief that our emotions are what we really are—what we really feel. But a lot of those “real” feelings are simply habits. A certain incident comes up, and immediately you breathe in a certain way and you perceive it in a certain way and you frame the issue in a certain way. You're stuck as long as you can't back off from these things and refabricate it in a different way.

The breath is one of the best ways of giving you a separate place to stay. As soon as there's a tightness in the breath, think of it relaxing. It's good, as you go around through the day, to have a sense of where when things tend to tense up in the body—around fear or anger, jealousy, whatever. Where are your habitual centers of the tension? What usually happens is that there'll be a spot that tenses up first and then the tension spreads from there throughout different parts of the nervous system. If you can watch over that spot, making that spot your default spot to stay, then you can catch things quickly and defuse them quickly. Breathe through the tension. Breathe through the tightness. Keep those areas open. That takes a lot of the power away from the emotion.

Often an emotion comes up and we have the idea that we've to get it out of our system. Well, the problem in the system is the tension that builds up in the water property, and in the other properties of the body all through the problem in the breath. If you can diffuse the breath, then you're basically taking what was hijacked and reclaiming it. Then you're in a position to look at other aspects that go into fabricating that emotion.

You start with what's called verbal fabrication, your directed thought and evaluation: in other words, what topics you focus on and what you tell yourself about them. Someone does something and it triggers all your anger triggers. But what are those triggers? The sense of oppression, the sense of being wronged: What are the issues that you tend to carry around in this way? A lot of us go around, as Ajaan Lee says, with exposed wires, and the current is on. It's ready to short-circuit. As soon as anything comes up, you run into anybody else's exposed wires, and there's going to be a short.

So you've got to know what your exposed wires are. What are the issues that tend to get to you? Then, before they get to you, sit down and talk to yourself about them. Why should you perceive that particular incident in that frame? Are there other ways of framing it? If you see someone as an oppressor, can you think of that person as being oppressed? Or can you think of yourself as standing outside the line of fire of that person's anger or abuse? When the person says

something really nasty, can you see the words going right past you? Or do you have an automatic, built-in vacuum cleaner that picks up nothing but the dirt in the atmosphere? Well, learn how to filter that. Turn the vacuum cleaner off. Let the words just go right past. Part of you might say, "But they're insulting me." Well, get out of the way. If insult comes your way, get out of the way. You don't have to take it in.

There's that famous passage where a brahman came to insult the Buddha. The Buddha asked him, "When you have guests and you offer them food and they don't accept the food, whose food is it?" And the brahman says, "It's mine." The Buddha said, "Well, in the same way, you offer that insult to me. I don't accept it, so, it's yours."

In other words, learn to look at yourself as not being under that person's power just because they've said that nasty thing. You don't have to get back at the person. And it certainly doesn't reflect badly on you that that person has said that thing. Even if you think that other people are sure to believe that other person, you can't go around straightening out everybody else's opinions about you. If they want to believe it, that's their business. You learn something that way.

So learn how to frame the situation a different way. That's the verbal fabrication part.

Then, the mental fabrication consists of your perceptions and feelings. If you're dealing with the breath in a skillful way, you've got the feelings on your side right there. As for the perceptions, they're very similar to directed thought and evaluation. Think of directed thought and evaluation as the full sentences that go through your mind, whereas the perceptions are just words or images. What kind of image do you have in mind when a difficult situation comes up? Are you the judge sitting way up on a seat where you can pass judgment on people down below you? You can end up passing some very callous judgments that way.

It would be better for your sake to adopt the image the Buddha gives of a person going through a desert: hot, tired, trembling with thirst. You come across a little bit of water in a cow footprint. Now, you know that if you try to scoop it up with your hand, you'll muddy the water. You need the water, so you get down on all fours and slurp it up. At that point, of course, you wouldn't want anybody to come along and take a picture of you. But even though the pose may be undignified, it's what you've got to do.

In the same way, even though you may feel that it's beneath you to try to look for the good in the other person, you need that person's goodness. Otherwise, if you go around in the world seeing nothing but the bad things that other people do, you get inclined to follow their bad example. But if you realize that this person

does have *some* goodness, it makes it easier to have some goodwill for that person and not get angry.

If that's too much, you have to remind yourself that you're harming yourself with the anger. Remember the Buddha's instructions on thinking about what happens to people when they're angry: What do they do? They look ugly when they're angry. Often they destroy things that are dear to them. They ruin their reputation one way or another. They ruin their wealth one way or another. All this would be gratifying to an enemy, to see them do that. If all that you can see of that other person is he or she is your enemy, this is what you think about: "The other person wants to do me in, but I'm not going to let me do myself in. I'm not going to give the other person the satisfaction of seeing me do myself in."

That attitude may be a defilement—it's a form of spite—but if it's what you need to think, okay, that's what you've got to think: anything to get past the anger. The Buddha was once asked, "Who does the Buddha condone the killing of?" Some people would have you believe that he condoned state killing against terrorists, or killing an evil aggressor, but he didn't. The one thing he condoned the killing of was anger.

So think about your difficult situation in whatever ways, develop perceptions of whatever kind help you get past your tendency to go for anger.

It's good to think about these things beforehand, so you don't have to get suddenly creative when anger's staring you right in the face. You've thought the matter through. After all, we all know where our buttons are. We know where our issues are. So sit down and think about them. What can you do to keep those buttons from being pushed? What can you do not to get pulled into those issues again? That's a useful meditation.

Meditation's not just a matter of being in the present moment. Right effort is not just a matter of being in the present moment. There's the right effort of trying to prevent unskillful states from arising. That means you sit down and think beforehand, especially if you know you're going to go into a situation where people are ready to push your buttons. You've got to deactivate the buttons. Sit down and plan. If this person says *x*, what are you going to do? The fact that people say unpleasant things should not surprise you or catch you off guard.

This is another way the Buddha has you think to depersonalize the whole thing. Realize that the kind of speech that human beings engage in is sometimes well-meaning and sometimes not well-meaning. Sometimes it's true and sometimes it's false. Sometime it's gentle; sometimes it's harsh. Sometimes it's outrageous. So when someone says something outrageous to you, that's not the first time that's happened in the world. You're not the only person who's being

subjected to that. Everybody, even the Buddha, was subjected to criticism—totally unfair. Just chalk that up to the fact that you were born as a human being and this is what human beings are subject to. This reflection is not meant to make you totally passive, but at least it gets you emotionally out of the issue. Then you can look at it from a more objective standard: What would be an effective thing to say right now?

The other way of depersonalizing the situation that the Canon recommends is to say, “An unpleasant sound has made contact at the ear.” And leave it at that. How many times have you thought that when someone’s been saying something really nasty to you? Just leave it right at the ear and don’t take it into your mind; don’t take it into your heart. That’s it all it is—an unpleasant sound. Can you leave it there and not suck it in; not elaborate stories around it?

These are important skills: learning how to recognize how you fabricate an emotion and how you do it unskillfully; and how you can deconstruct it and construct something more skillful in its place. It may sound artificial, but the whole process of constructing an emotion is artificial in the first place. It’s something fabricated. There’s an element of intention and, in many cases, the intentions have become so habitual that they seem automatic, because of the strength of the perceptions and the strength of the breath or that particular way of breathing around greed or aversion or delusion. You tend to think, “Well, this is what I really feel.” But it’s just a habit, and as with any habit, if you see that it’s harmful to you, harmful to the people around you, you want to learn how to undo it; replace it with other habits.

So the breath is your first line of defense. This is why it’s so important to get sensitive to how you manipulate the breath energy and, as I was saying the other day, it’s as if you have a series of tools. The breath is a tool that you can use to counteract a negative emotion. The ways you think can be used to counteract a negative emotion. The perceptions you hold in mind can be changed to counteract an emotion. You can do that because you’re using the tools in the light of day. If you leave them underground, you use them underground where it’s dark.

Imagine all the harm you would do if you just took your saw and started sawing in the dark or took your hammer and started banging away in the dark. That’s the way most of us deal with our breath energy; with our perceptions and our thoughts. The whole purpose of the meditation is to allow us to use these tools in the light of day so that we can develop a path, a path that takes us to something better: a better way of living, a better way of acting, speaking, thinking. This is something we can all manage. For some people, it comes more quickly, for

others it comes more slowly, but that's not the issue. The issue is that you can get better at how you act and speak and think. That's what the meditation is for.