

Perceiving the Breath

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When you first read Ajaan Lee's instructions for breath meditation, there are a lot of sections that, for a Westerner, may seem very strange. He talks about the breath going down the spine through the different parts of the body: the arms, the hands, the legs, the feet. If you think of breath as air, it sounds impossible. And it is: You can't push air through these things. But when you think of breath as energy—and that's what he wants you to think—you realize you're simply letting the energy flow and it's actually already there.

Now, you may not realize this. It's like hunting for mushrooms for the first time. There are certain kinds of mushrooms where, if you look in a pile of leaves, the expert mushroom hunter says, "Look! There are lots and lots of this mushroom in that pile of leaves," but you don't see anything. You see nothing but leaves. Then all of a sudden there's a little switch in your perception, and you recognize one of these little dark brown spots not as a leaf or space between leaves but an actual mushroom. Then there are mushrooms everywhere. They were there all along, it's just that your categories of perception were telling you something else.

Or like those magic eye pictures: You look at them one way and there's just a welter of little dots and shredded pieces of color. Then there's a shift in perception, and you see a three-dimensional pattern in the same picture.

And it's the same with the breath: You're sitting here with the breath all the time, but unless you learn how to perceive it that way, you're not going to sense it as breath. There's an energy in how you simply feel the body. The fact that you're sitting here and you know the body is here: Part of that is because of the breath. As we're meditating on the breath, we want to get sensitive to that because holding this different perception in mind helps get the mind into the breath, snug with the breath, surrounded by a sense of breath, and it feels really comfortable. When you have that sense of comfort, it's a lot easier to settle down and enjoy being settled down.

So try to hold that perception in mind. When you focus on your back and perceive it as solid, ask yourself: What if it's breath energy? If it's breath energy, what kind of energy does it feel like? Does it feel constricted or does it feel open?

If you're not sure, try breathing in different ways. You've got the in-and-out

breath, and then there's the breath that flows through the blood vessels and through the nerves and connects with all the muscles and other parts of the body. That has a gentle flow to it—and as with the currents of the ocean, there are many levels of flow going on. There's instantaneous flow: As soon as you start breathing in, there's an energy that's already gone all the way through the nerves. It's because of that energy that you actually breathe in. Then there's the flow of energy that follows on the activity of breathing in, like a second layer of massage, that's a little bit slower.

These things are all happening, and if you allow your old perceptions of what's going on in the body to loosen up a bit, you begin to see that in between in the spaces of those loosened-up perceptions there is a possibility that breath can flow. That way, your in-breath is not being pushed against, say, the tissues of the body so much. Your in-breath is learning how to meld with the breath energy that's already there, the breath that's more subtle. And on an even a deeper level, there's a breath that's absolutely still.

The subtle moving breath is the one you want to pay most attention to, because that's what's going to allow you to relax, to open up around different sensations in the body. If there's any sense of tension or tightness in the body, think of the area around it as being open, and that tension can dissipate out into the openness of the energy field.

When you think of the body as an energy field this way, it's a lot easier to settle down into it. When the breath energy comes in, it's not fighting the body. When you breathe out, it's not that you're trying to squeeze all the breath out. You just let some of it out. A good part of it stays right there, all the time. It's just that the different energies mingle, so you want to allow them—once you get a sense of what this is all about—to mingle in a way that feels harmonious and energizing.

You'll find that this really is a good way to get into the present moment, to feel at home. That sense of feeling at home allows you to relax even more around the breath. All too often, the mind is like a cat that jumps from one uncertain, unstable place to another uncertain, unstable place. It's always tensed up. As soon as it lands on one thing, it's tensing up to go to the next and the next. It never has the chance to fully relax.

You want your mind to be more like a cat lying on the floor. You've seen those cats: Sometimes they lie so spread out they don't even look like they have bones. Remember that cat in *Peanuts*? It was just flopped over Frieda's arms. You want to have that sense of allowing the mind to relax fully into the body in the same

sort of liquid way.

What you're doing is giving the mind something good to return to here in the present moment because, especially as you're beginning to meditate, you find it has other things going on as well. You've told yourself you're going to sit here and meditate, but who is there inside you? Who told whom inside? You find that there's actually a whole committee here in the mind. Some of the committee members want to meditate right now, and other committee members have other ideas. They want to think about yesterday, think about tomorrow, think about whatever.

Your best way of dealing with them is to give the mind something really interesting to focus on, something to explore here in the present moment, whatever feels good and gives you an immediate sense of reward for focusing in a particular way and just staying right here. Having this good place to come back to is one of the prime ways of training the mind to stay with something you want it to stay with. You learn how to relax around it.

When there is a sense of ease, there may not be too much to begin with but then you notice: This part of the body feels easier or more light or more pleasant than that part of the body. One way of noticing this is just going down and comparing the different sides of the body: How does your left shoulder feel when you compare it to your right? How about your left hip and your right hip, or your left knee and your right knee? Go down the body. Your left foot and your right foot: Which one feels more relaxed? How about the one that's less relaxed: Can you think it to relax so that it's just as relaxed as the one on the other side?

One of the immediate advantages of this is a greater sense of ease, but it also goes deeper than that. It's good for the body to have all the parts of the body being nourished by the blood and the breath energy. And it's good for the mind to have a place where it can settle down and put aside all of its burdens, to relax around the present moment.

Now, there will be some cases where the mind refuses to stay with the breath even for two or three breaths. That's when you have to ask yourself, "Okay, what else is going on here?" If there's something that's insistently pulling you away, you may want to spend a little time thinking about the disadvantages of wasting your meditation time thinking about that thing. Part of the mind may say, "This is really important, you've got this problem you've got to face tomorrow, so here's a whole hour, why don't we think about it now?" The best argument against that is, "Okay, at the end of the meditation we can think about it." And if you allow the

mind to rest and settle in with one object, and gain a sense of strength and a sense of nourishment, a sense of well-being, you'll be able to think through that issue a lot more clearly, to see the issue a lot more clearly once the mind is rested. So if there's something really important, put it aside and say you'll come back to that later when the mind is better prepared.

There are other things that are not all that important, simply topics you like to think about when you have a little empty space and empty time in your mind. Lust may come up, fear may come up, jealousy may come up, the desire to relive old wrongs may come up, and you have to remind yourself: There's nothing gained by these things. These are old movies, and even though you may tweak the plot a little bit or tweak this a little bit, it's still the same old stuff, over and over again. You've been through these things many times. They may give you a little bit of pleasure, but right now you're working on something that's going to give you a lot more pleasure. It takes more work, it may be unfamiliar, but it's going to pay off in the long run. But if you think about thoughts of anger, thoughts of jealousy or lust, where is it going to take you? If the mind keeps coming back to these things, it's going to start wanting to go off and *do* these things, act on these things, and do you really want to do that? Haven't you had enough?

That's a second way of dealing with insistent thoughts. A third is to simply ignore them. They're going to be there and they're going to chatter away, but think of them as obstreperous members of the committee, the kind that are troublemakers, but if you ignore them, that's all they do: They just chatter away and they're not going to do anything else. They may come at you with fearful faces and look a lot fiercer than they really are, a lot more powerful than they really are, but you realize that they're just voices chattering away in the mind. There's no need to pay them any attention. The breath is still here; you can still focus on the breath.

Years back, I was giving a meditation class at a college, and they assigned us a room that had an enormously loud clock—*tick tock, tick tock*—so most of the people during the meditation session weren't with their breath, they were all with was the clock, upset about the loud clock. I had to point out to them, "Even though the clock may be ticking, the breath is still there. The sound of the clock hasn't destroyed the breath. You have to learn how to ferret out what you want to pay attention to and consciously ignore anything else."

In the same way, you find that a lot of these thoughts, if you don't pay them any attention, begin to lose interest. They're like stray cats and stray dogs. They

come to you for a little food. If you pay them any attention, you've fed them, and they're going to come back again. But if you simply know they're there but you ignore them, they'll stop coming quite so frequently. That's another way of dealing with distractions.

A fourth way is, once you've gotten used to seeing the body as breath and noticing how the different ways you breathe are connected to the ways you think, you may begin to notice that when a thought is about to appear, it's going to start as a little stirring in your breath energy, like a little knot appearing. If you can sense it soon enough, all you have to do is breathe through the knot, relax the knot, and you find out that it's not all that intricate a knot at all. It's not one of the ones you have to patiently pull all the little strands out. It's just that the energy has gotten wound up around itself, so you're just going to breathe through it and it'll unwind, unsnarl itself.

And then you just keep watch. It's like a videogame where you have a little laser that zaps the enemy as soon as it begins to appear out of the shadows. The image I've used is that it's like being a spider on a web. The spider is in one spot on the web, but because everything in the web is connected, the slightest little disturbance anywhere in the web notifies the spider, "Hey, there's an insect that's hit the web," so it runs over, finds the insect, kills it, and goes back.

In the same way, you have your center in the body where you normally stay, but you want to be alert and aware and sensitive to the whole body so that the slightest little stirring or snarling up with the breath energy anywhere in the body, you're alert to it. You go right to it, zap it, and come back.

The fifth way of dealing with distracting thoughts, if none of these other methods work, is just to focus down on one spot. The Buddha says to stick your tongue against the palate of your mouth and just crush your mind with the mind, as he puts it. And what does it mean to crush your mind with the mind? It means that you focus down on one spot and you stay there and just blare out every other thought that might come up.

You might use the meditation word and repeat it really, really fast, or say, "I'm just going to focus on this one spot. I'm not going to move." It's like clamping down. Of the various methods, it's the least comfortable and the one that you can't hold for very long. It involves the least amount of discernment, but sometimes it's what works. Just clamp down and then when things finally settle down a bit, you can come out and return to the breath.

So there's a wide range of ways that you can deal with the distractions. The

best one is the first: Make the breath really interesting. Try to figure out what is it about the way that you perceive the breath that's preventing you from feeling really comfortable and absorbed in the breath. Learn how to flip through different perceptions, develop some magic eyes in your mind, so that what you've been looking at all along suddenly reveals itself as having something else you didn't see there before, something you can use to your advantage. Because the way we perceive things is related to the use we get out of them.

As in developing any skill, you find that you perceive the things that you're working on in lots of different ways, because you're encountering more issues and learning how to deal with them. So the way you perceive the breath is an important part of gaining the skill over the breath and using that skill to train the mind in skillful qualities that go even deeper and have a more profound effect. This is where discernment begins. It's not just a step that you're going to step over and move on. It's the foundation of everything else.