

## *The Uses of the Breath*

*April 9, 2015*

The Buddha taught lots of different meditation techniques, lots of different objects that you can focus on. But, as Ajaan Lee points out, the breath is the home base. In his terms, the other objects are places where you go foraging when you need special kinds of food for the mind. Otherwise, you come back home. This is because the breath has all kinds of uses.

Working with the breath helps you strengthen the body. There's a story of Ajaan Lee going into the jungle. He was planning to spend the rains retreat there. Three days he walked into the spot where he was intending to stay. Soon after arriving, he had a heart attack. He realized the only way he was going to get out was to pull himself together. There was no medicine. There was no way to get doctors. So he used the breath.

It's because of his exploring how to use the breath to pull his health together that we have Method Two. So when you're feeling tired, the breath is a good place to focus and to think about the different parts of the body that need breath energy that have been starved. And give it to them.

The breath is also a good place for the mind to grow calm. When you think of the breath coming in and out throughout the entire body, think of your awareness spreading to fill the whole body, too. It's very difficult for the mind to think of past or future when its range of awareness is so broad. It's as if, when you were going to think about the past or the future, the mind would have to go down a little tube. You'd have to make it small to fit down the tube.

But if you think of the breath covering everything in the body and your awareness covering everything in the body, your hands are nailed down to your hands; your feet are nailed down to your feet. Everything is in place. Then it's very hard to think about the past or the future. The mind can calm down and, at the same time, feel very spacious.

You don't want your concentration to be contracted or tightened. Try thinking of your awareness as a light that spreads as a radiance in all directions. The breath can spread in all directions, too. It can come in from all directions, go out through all directions. This is a stillness that's not constricted and it's not confined. It's a stillness that's wide open. Think of having one center someplace in the body into which everything comes and out of which everything goes. This centered and broad awareness, as I say often in the guided meditations, is healing for the body. It's healing for the mind.

The breath is also useful as an object for gaining insight. It's an object of mindfulness. Along with mindfulness, there's the ardency with which you work with the breath. This gives you a lot of insight into the process of what the Buddha calls fabrication.

There's bodily fabrication: the breath itself. It shapes your experience of the body.

There's verbal fabrication: Technically, this is directed thought and evaluation. When you're focused on the breath, you're directing your thoughts there and you evaluate the breath as it's coming in, going out. You also evaluate the mind as it relates to the breath so that you get them to fit snugly together.

Finally, there's mental fabrication: feelings and perceptions. Perceptions are the labels you give to things. So for the time being, you just give the label "breath" to all the energies in the body. Breathe in a way that gives rise to feelings of ease, both physical ease and mental ease.

This means that when you're with the breath, you're here with all the building blocks of the way you experience having a body and having a mind. When you get hands-on experience with dealing with these things in these terms, that's where insight begins. When the Buddha talks about the various ways of dealing with the breath, the basic pattern all the way through is that you get sensitive to a particular aspect of how the mind is relating to the breath, either in terms of the breath itself or the feelings that arise from being focused on the breath or the states of mind as they relate to breath. You get sensitive to these things and then you notice how you're fabricating them.

The Buddha doesn't say that we're simply passive recipients of things coming in from outside. Our minds are actively going out, looking for things to feed on. Fabrication is how we fix our food. And because the way we feed is the cause of suffering, you really want to get very familiar with how you fabricate things and learn how to fabricate them in a more skillful way. This is what insight is all about.

You fabricate the breath. You fabricate your sense of the body through the breath. You fabricate your mind through your feelings and perceptions, the same way you'd fix eggs or potatoes or whatever. You can't eat them in their raw state. You've got to do something with them. It's the same with the things of the world: We don't consume them in their raw state. We have to make recognizable food out of them: physical food, emotional food, mental food. Then we tend to forget about the process of fabrication as we gobble these things down.

We're cooks at the same time that we're eaters, but we tend to take all the cooking for granted and just focus on eating things up. We think the world is the way we experience it, but actually we've cooked it that way. A major part of

gaining insight is stepping back from your cooking processes and trying to see, “Well, what are the raw ingredients from which you’re making this food?” Sometimes it’s like those dishes you hear about the Japanese doing at the end of World War II. Here they had these barbarians occupying them and some of the cooks got their revenge by putting a little bit of human excrement into the dishes they were preparing. They were very clever, very skilled cooks, so they could disguise it. The Americans didn’t know they were eating shit. Well, that’s the way we feed ourselves sometimes. We feed on all kinds of horrible things, but we fix them up so that we think they’re nice.

So as you’re getting used to seeing how the mind fabricates its experience with the breath, you basically gain insight into these processes of cooking. Then you start noticing how you do this with the rest of the world. You start taking these things apart. You say, “What is it? What is the raw material here? Is it really worth consuming, these things I love to feed on? What are they in their raw state?”

The first thing you’ve got to do as you work with the breath is learn how to tranquilize these processes of fabrication as much as you can. That’s the third step in the three major steps in each tetrad of breath meditation. The first two, as I said, were, one, getting sensitive to this aspect of your experience; two, getting sensitive to how you’re fabricating it; and then three, learning how to calm the fabrication down, calming your breath down, making your perceptions and feelings more calm.

In other words, what perception of how you breathe is going to make the breathing calmer? What perception of how you are located in the body, how your awareness is located in the body, allows the mind to grow calm? Try to poke around inside and see what those perceptions are. Find which ones are most tranquil. This is how you become more and more sensitive to how much you’ve been adding to things: how much salt and pepper you’ve been putting on; how much fish sauce, soy sauce, whatever.

Then you can begin to see things simply as they are—or, as the Buddha says, as they’ve come to be. This gives rise to a very strong sense of dispassion, a desire not to need to eat anymore. But to get to that point, the mind has to be strong. This is why you can’t do just insight practice. You’ve got to have the mind feeding off the breath, feeding off its concentration, feeding off its mindfulness and discernment so that you can have the strength then to step back from things.

Otherwise, if the mind is starved, it’s like scientists running an experiment. You’ve got monkeys in the experimental room, and the scientists been given a grant to buy bananas to feed the monkeys. But if the scientists are hungry, they’ll eat the bananas themselves. You’ve got to have the mind really well fed so that it

can step back and look at this process of feeding from a sense of well-being, from a sense of wondering why you have to keep on feeding. That's how the mind works its way free: all of this from watching the breath.

Now, as Ajaan Lee points out, there are other topics of meditation that you may need from time to time. When the mind is overcome with lust, you might want to analyze things in the body down to the thirty-two parts, or any other parts that you find particularly effective in putting a check on your lust. Spread thoughts of goodwill or equanimity when you're feeling angry. Contemplate death when you're getting lazy—not to get discouraged, but to remind yourself that you don't have much guaranteed time, but you do have this moment.

The purpose of these contemplations is to get you back to the breath. So try to focus your attention here to see what you need right now. If you need to soothe the body or strengthen the body, okay, breathe in a way that makes the body stronger. If you need to calm the mind, breathe in a way that calms the mind down. If the mind is tired, breathe in a way that gives it energy. If you're ready to start developing insight, look into the processes of how you're doing this so that you can understand how the mind goes about shaping things, how it goes about fixing its food. That way, you can understand this process of feeding, which is such a burden for the mind, even though it is the source of our nourishment.

You're trying to find a part of the mind that doesn't need nourishing. But to get there, you first need to nourish the mind well with the meditation. And the breath provides a good foundation for all of these things.