

## *Healing Awareness*

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One of the distinctive features of Ajaan Lee's instructions on breath meditation is his emphasis on breathing in a way that feels really comfortable and nourishing throughout the body. Of course, this is nothing new. In the Buddha's meditation instructions, he talks about training yourself to be aware of the whole body as you breathe in and breathe out, how to calm what he calls bodily fabrication, i.e., to calm the breath, how to train yourself to breathe in and out sensitive to rapture, and to breathe in and out sensitive to pleasure.

Now, the rapture and pleasure are not going to come unless the breath is comfortable. Getting the breath to be comfortable is often difficult for a lot of us, because as soon as we focus on something, as when we focus on the breath, we tend to tense up around it as a way of reminding ourselves to stay there. We put pressure on it, squeeze it a little bit, especially if it's something inside the body. So it doesn't come easily to focus on the breath in a way that actually gives pleasure. As soon as we focus on the breath, we tighten up around it.

I had this problem when I was first working on this method. Ajaan Fuang would talk about catching the breath, and I'd try to catch it by tensing up around it. Then one day, when I was sitting in a bus in Bangkok, I realized that if I'd just let the breath flow and watch it flow, things were a lot easier. I, being a Westerner, later complained to Ajaan Fuang about his choice of words. He laughed and said, "Catching' here just means that you keep watch on it and stick with it. Figure out what's exactly the right amount of pressure to put on it, so that you can stay with it but you're not interfering with the flow of the energy in the body." Learning how to focus on something and allow it to flow, learning how to focus on something and allow it to relax, is a very useful skill.

This is the healing awareness that Ajaan Lee talks about when he says that the breath and mindfulness are like the ingredients in a medicine. Mindfulness is the actual medicine, and the breath is the medium that allows the medicine to seep into the body.

So try to work on this. Choose a spot in the body where it's easiest to stay focused. Try to focus on it in a way that allows the energy there to flow. Don't squeeze up around on it at the end of the in-breath. And don't squeeze up around it at the end of the out-breath. You may call this "soft focus" to begin with. In other words, you're not coming down too hard on it. Just try to stay with that one

area in the body and see if you can sense a sense of flow there. Then stay with it in a way that allows it to flow.

Once you've learned this technique with this spot, then you move to another spot, then another spot. You'll find that certain parts of the body have a better breath flow than others, in which case you ask yourself, "Can I actually improve the breath flow by the way I stay focused there?" It helps to come from an area where you've been successful, or where the breath is already flowing well, and then you move into this other area. See if you can open things up a bit. In fact, "opening," "allowing": These are two words that should be in the back of your mind. Think of there being breath energy channels, and try to get a sense of the way in which you squeeze the channels or close the channels subconsciously.

What you're trying to do here is to bring some conscious awareness that allows them to open up.

There are some parts of the body that are going to be really resistant because they've experienced your conscious awareness in the past, and it's been pretty roughshod. We tend to abuse the breath energy in the body. When we do that, it's very easy to go out and abuse other things outside. So learning to make your awareness a healing awareness tends to counteract one of the main problems in life, which is that when we focus on things, we tend to turn them into issues, turn them into problems.

This is what the first and second noble truths are all about. We want something. We focus on it, it becomes the location of our interest, and so we create suffering. The Buddha didn't say that everything is suffering. I don't know how many times you see this again and again and again. People keep writing about it: "All is suffering." No, it's not. There's a lot that's not. But we're the ones who make a lot of suffering out of the things that we like and that we want, creating issues, creating problems for ourselves. Then, of course, the suffering spreads out and creates issues and problems for everybody else.

As Ajaan MahaBoowa once noted, wherever there are issues in the world, that's because there are human beings there. In parts of the world where there are no human beings, there are no issues. So we have to look into the way in which we create issues out of things. It comes from the way we focus on things and create stories around them—very complicated narratives sometimes. Other times, they're more basic, lizard-brain narratives. But either way, we get upset by what this person said or that person is doing, and what we want and what we're not getting. We don't know how to look at things in such a way that actually solves problems rather than creating them.

So start by learning how to solve the problems with your breath. This is the thing that's actually closest to your awareness, closer than anything else. Without the breath, you couldn't see out your eyes. You couldn't hear out your ears. You couldn't sense the body. All your knowledge of the senses has to come through the breath. So back up. Instead of allowing your awareness to go running out, flashing out the senses, come back and see what's right closest to the mind with its relationship to the breath. And see the ways in which you're abusing the breath by the way you push it here and push it there in your desire push your way out to look at other things and think about other things. Try to back up. Back up and look here.

How are you relating to this energy that's so close to your awareness? Find the areas where it's running well and focus on those areas in a way that allows them to continue running well. Then see if you can allow that same sense of flow to flow into other areas that are not running so well.

One thing you may notice as you get to know the body is that one side of the body tends to have better flow than the other. With some people, the difference is not all that marked. But in other cases, it's really strong. So if you can sense which side has a better flow or where in the body the flow is better, then see if you can use that same awareness and bring it to the other side of the body to even things out, to bring things up to the good side. This way, you get practice in having an awareness that's healing rather than problem-creating.

The more you get to know this awareness, the more the implications of this kind of awareness begin to work themselves out, partly because you learn that there's something really good here that you can feed on—a sense of well-flowing energy in the body; a healing energy in the body that nourishes the mind. Then you see that a lot of the mind's reasons for going out further and looking for issues and creating issues outside come from the fact that it's hungry. When it's not hungry, it's not so interested in creating those issues anymore.

All the issues we have around what other people say, what other people do, especially people who are close to us: We begin to realize that we don't need to feed off those other people the way we had to before. When we're not feeding off of them, then we don't get sick off of the things that we don't like about what they do and they say. We now have a better place to feed, especially if they're people who we're very close to. Sometimes we realize that the reason the things they do and say get us upset is because we love them so much.

We have to distinguish between love and feeding. The two are very close. It's possible to have love and goodwill for other people but without having to feed off of them. When you're not feeding off of them, then you don't get sick from the

things they do and they say. So you have to look into your own feeding and loving habits.

There was a science fiction story I read years back. There were astronauts in a rocket, going from planet to planet in another solar system, and they had developed a sensor on their rocket that would sense whether a planet was inhabited or not and if it was inhabited, whether the inhabitants were friendly or hostile.

They came to this one planet, and as they were getting closer and closer to it, they realized that it was inhabited. Their sensors also began to pick up that there were very loving creatures living there. This was going to be a good place to go. They would be met with goodwill and love, they thought.

So the rocket landed, and they saw these little furry creatures running around on the ground and up the side of the rocket. The sensor on the rocket was pegging out: high level of love; high level of goodwill. So they opened the doors to the rocket, and the little creatures came in and ate them all up.

For a lot of us, that's what love is: It's something we're going to feed on, somebody we can feed on. So you want to learn to bring your goodwill and concern and intimacy with other people and make it a healing presence. Learn how you can have goodwill for them but without having to feed on them. That way you suffer less. They suffer less.

It's the same as the relationship with your mind and your body. If you allow the body to do its thing properly, it'll provide you with a good energy here. The breath is an energy that you can feed off without harming the body at all. When you're well-fed inside, you don't need to go feeding other places.

So this is not just an idle skill or an unhealthy attachment to pleasure. We will overcome it at some point, but meanwhile it's a pleasure that's needed to overcome the pleasure you get off of other things. The pleasure of learning how to have an awareness that's healing: If you've trained it to be healing in its relationship to the body, you can find that you can help heal other issues outside. You bring your awareness, alertness, your mindfulness, your ardency, your discernment—all of these qualities get brought together in the quality of this awareness that you can then apply to other areas outside where you used to create issues and problems, but now you can approach them in a new way. You can solve the problems by the way you relate to things.

So start with your relationship with the breath. Get on good terms with it, and it'll teach the mind a lot of things it needs to know—because the breath, as Ajaan Lee said in one of his Dhamma talks, is a mirror for the mind. It responds very quickly to what the mind is doing. So it's a good topic for becoming sensitive to

what your awareness is like, what your focus is like. As you get more sensitive to the breath, you become more sensitive to the mind in a way that heals both sides.