

Reclaiming the Breath

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We focus on the breath while we meditate as a way of reclaiming the breath for ourselves, because all too often it's taken over by anger or fear, and the breath becomes our enemy. It's uncomfortable when you're angry. It's uncomfortable when you're afraid. Any unskillful quality coming up in the mind that moves into the body does so by means of the breath. Then it exerts extra power over the mind, because even though anger or fear may come and go, the uncomfortable breathing lasts, and we've learned to associate that uncomfortable breathing with that state of mind. As long as it's there, we think that the state of mind is still there. So we dig it up again.

The anger goes for a little while and then it lapses. But the breath is still disturbed, so we dig the anger up again. We can keep this going for quite a while. The same with fear—when the emotion has taken over the breath, it's as if we're held hostage.

So what we've got to do is reclaim the breath. If we're used to having the breath be really uncomfortable, this can be threatening because the mind's natural response to this kind of uncomfortable sensation, of course, is to try to get out. But you can go only so far. After all, the mind needs the body in order to live, so you keep finding yourself coming back to a house where people are always squabbling inside.

So you've got to learn how to sort things out. Find at least one toehold in your body where the breath feels okay—where the energy feels okay. You may want to find a still spot. They're located in different parts of the body. Ajaan Lee talks about the still spot that's right at the diaphragm. But you could find others as well—the middle of the head, right where the legs join the torso, or the base of the spine. If you focus your attention there, just stay with that sense of stillness as you breathe in and breathe out. You'll find that that'll have a calming effect on the breath. That way, if the breath has felt alien, you can gradually get a sense that “This is my territory. This is where I belong”—in that still spot. Then gradually you can move into other parts of the body, reclaiming the place.

Remind yourself, “Okay, breathe calmly. Let the breath go long; let it go deep. You're sending an important message to the subconscious parts of the mind and whatever the emotion was that took over: It doesn't have the whole breath anymore; it doesn't have the whole body. Then you can begin to question, “Okay. How continuous is this anger? How continuous is this fear?” The mental

moments are very brief. Our problem is that we stitch them together. So, learn how to stitch something else together instead—your awareness of the body. As the Buddha said, this can be your safe spot—keeping track of the body in and of itself, as we chanted just now. Just the breath right here.

You don't have to think of the meaning of the breath or its relationship to anything else, just the sensation of the breath in whatever spot you can find that you feel okay with the breath—ardent, alert, mindful. In other words, you want to do this skillfully. That's the ardency. Alertness is noticing what's going on. Mindfulness is what reminds you that this is what you should be doing—staying here right now, giving the mind a comfortable place to stay, putting aside greed and distress with reference to the world. Any other thoughts that interfere with the breath that would make you want to see the body in the context of the world outside or in the context of the world outside: Just learn how to put those aside. Regard them as a strange, foreign language that you don't have to understand right now.

Just be with the sensation of the breathing. This gives you a place where you can settle in and, at the very least, have a spot where you feel okay inside. Even though other issues may be whirling around you as you go through the day, you've still got this spot. Try to maintain it. Protect it because good things can grow from this spot, both in the stillness of the body and in the sense of the mind's having a good, solid place to stay—its own spot where it doesn't have to be embroiled in thoughts.

It doesn't have to even participate in the conversations, even to the extent of chasing them away. Think of them as people in another room having a conversation, but you're not involved. That way, you can step outside of the vicious circle where the thoughts hijack the breath, and then the breath augments the unskillful thoughts. You can break that. Then you can move more and more into the body, reclaim more and more of the body as you feel better here. This feels like a place where you really belong.

Then you can start playing with the breath as you get more comfortable being here, working with the different rhythms of breathing and the different spots in the body where you can focus your attention. Ajaan Lee talks about three levels of breath energy. One is the in-and-out breath. The second is the sense of energy flowing through the nerves and the blood vessels, and the third is the sense of still breath. If you really get tuned into that sense of still breath, you realize that you don't have to breathe in and out as much as you did before. The in-and-out breath gets calmer and calmer, and if you're really solidly with those spots, everything

gets very still. Again, as I said, Ajaan Lee talks about the spot between the lungs and the stomach right at the diaphragm, right in front of the body.

But there are other spots, too, and it's up to you to figure out where your spots are. Usually the spots that make a difference are the ones where, when the breath comes in, the energy of the in breath seems to radiate from that spot or begins at that spot. If you can simply focus on that spot and allow it to be very still, you tune in to a different sense of the body. It's like tuning in to a different radio station, or those old magic eye pictures where you first look at them and there's just a crazy quilt of two dimensional designs, but then something switches in your brain and you see it as a three dimensional shape—same pattern, but your perception of it is different.

It's the same with this still breath energy in the body. Some people find this still energy a little bit threatening because when you first tune into it, it feels like you're going to drown. But you can remind yourself you're not dying. There's energy all around you. There's breath all around you. There's oxygen all around you. If the body needs to breathe, it will. When the mind is really, really still, it's using less oxygen, so the need for in-an-out breathing goes down. Some people find they can tune into this quite quickly. Other people find that there's a very long, gradual process before they're willing to allow the breath to settle down like that. Again, it's a matter of trusting the body, trusting your relationship to the body, trusting your relationship to the breath.

But after a while, if you've been settling in gradually over time and you have a sense of where your spots are, where that energy is, and you learn to trust it, then you can tune into it a lot more quickly. It isn't just a matter of your trusting the breath. There are parts of the body that may not trust you—or may be getting in the way. You find that as you go through the body, there are certain areas that seem frozen and hard. The energy doesn't seem to move there. Don't force it, though. You might try thinking of the energy going through there to begin with. But if that part of the body resists, just leave it alone for the time being.

Treat it like a wild animal that you gradually want to get more and more tame; more and more used to you. You don't stare straight at the wild animal. In the beginning, you don't get involved at all. You just walk past, looking elsewhere, until the animal gets used to your being there. Gradually you can get more and more involved. And it's the same with these areas. If they see that you're treating the rest of the body well, they may be more willing to open up. You can't force the issue. Just keep being as skillful as you can with the parts of the breath energy that you *can* control and that you can gain a sensitivity for. The parts of the body that were closed off will, at some point, suddenly break open.

So you're reclaiming your body; reclaiming your breath. You're getting more familiar with what this energy is that holds the body and the mind together. This is the basic glue that keeps the mind and body in touch with each other and keeps us alive, yet we don't pay much attention to it. Our attention goes outside. As soon as we come back in, we're not familiar with the territory. It can seem confusing at first because there are lots of different types of energies going on here, and in some cases, our perceptual apparatus, you might call it, or way of thinking or framework of understanding this energy, is not adequate to what's actually going on.

This is why it's good to read up, say, on what Ajaan Lee has to say about the breath energies, to give yourself an idea of what's possible and to give you a vocabulary so that you can explain things to yourself. That way, it's not so foreign and alien. After all, this is your energy. This is your body. This is your breath. Don't let anybody else take it away from you. Don't let anger take it away from you. Don't let greed or fear take it away from you. A lot of good things can happen for the mind as it begins to settle back in here and develop a sense of belonging here. It gains a good foundation in the body—and it gets more and more familiar with the foundation it has inside the mind.

There is that part of the mind that just observes without commenting on things, without giving meaning to things. It's just alert. There are a lot of times in life when issues outside are beyond your control, but you've got this space inside the mind from which you can watch things. It doesn't get upset with other things as they're going ways you don't want them to. And it's not overly excited about when things go the way you want. It just notes, "This is the way things are." The more you get familiar with that part of the mind, the more you find that this is the best refuge you've got so far. So you learn to protect it, appreciate it.

Again, it's like those still types of breath energy in the body. Sometimes, when you first encounter it, it seems a little foreign, because, after all, the mind is used to giving meanings to things and commenting on things all the time. It's as if you're living in an extended family. Everybody has the right to comment on your life. You suddenly go off alone. You're missing the commentary. Things feel empty.

But if you learn to trust it, that this is a good, safe place to be, then you can tap into it more and more often, and it can provide you with the protection you need. After all, we do live in this body that, once it's born, is going to be aging. There's going to be illness. There's going to be death. It's kind of like a package deal. We thought we were buying the birth and the youth and the health, but we didn't realize that you can't get those without the package deal: the aging, the illness and

the death. So there are going to be a lot of things in life that we're not going to like.

So, what part of the mind is not going to be affected by aging? What part of the mind is not going to be affected by illness or death? You want to get to know that part. You do that by watching these things as they come and not get knocked off course. "Oh, this is what aging is like." It's there, but you don't have to suck it into your mind. It doesn't have to be sucked into your awareness, where it gets commented on, given meanings and turned into stories. "Oh, this is what that's like. Oh, that's what this is like."

So, right here in the body, with its awareness, there are some safe places, and you want to be able to access them. You want to be able to reclaim them for yourself. Don't let your greed, aversion, delusion, or fears take them away from you. If they have, this is how you reclaim them: Move into the body gradually. Get to know its various energies and how you can take advantage of it—the moving energies; the still energies; the movements of the mind; the still parts of the mind. Try to make a survey of the territory in here and you find that there are a lot of things that can give you a lot of advantages, that can do a lot of good for you.

If you treat the body in a trustworthy way, you find that you can trust it a lot more. So if you find that you're afraid of the body or you find it difficult to focus in here, ask yourself, "Are you treating the body in a trustworthy way?" Maybe if you change your tactics and change your approach, making it a more gradual and sensitive approach, you can develop a good relationship inside. Reclaim this as your home territory, and you'll have the grounding you'll need as you go through this package deal and come out unscathed.