

## *Directly & Indirectly to the Breath*

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Sometimes when you sit down and close your eyes, you're right here with the breath. There are not too many other things impinging on the mind. You find it easy to let them go. And there it is: the breath coming in, going out.

You can watch it for a while to gain a sense of its many ins and outs—in other words, the different layers of energy that are flowing here, the way you relate to your body right now.

See if you can put aside a lot of your preconceived notions about what's happening with the breathing and notice how it actually feels. When there's an impulse to breathe in, where do you feel it first? And how does it spread through the rest of the body?

Try to get in touch with the felt experience of the breath as much as you can. And then rearrange your perceptions around that, so if it feels like the breath begins in the navel, okay, focus on its beginning in the navel. You don't have to think about the air coming in and out of the nose. Or if it feels like it's coming from around the area of the heart, think that breath energy is flowing from the heart.

Or you may have your own spots. I've found that for some reason the area right at the outside of the pelvis on either side seems to be an important area. If that gets calmed down, then the whole rest of the body gets calmed down.

So each of us has our own patterns of energy flow. As you get to know them, you may begin to realize that some of them are good for the body and others are not. We have a repertoire of different ways of relating to the breath.

But if that's too complex to think about right now, just say, "Okay, how do you feel the breath?" Try to stay with that sensation, whatever it is, as much as you can.

There are other times, though, when you sit down to be with the breath and the mind just doesn't stay with the breath, at all. It's like taking an inflated ball and trying to keep it underwater. As soon as your grasp on the ball gets loosened a little bit, the ball comes shooting up out of the water.

That's a sign that the mind needs to be put in the right mood. So instead of working directly with the breath, you work with it indirectly, by choosing what the Buddha calls "an inspiring theme"—something you like to think about that's related to the Dhamma, related to your practice of the Dhamma. As you think about it and the mind gets calmed down, gets put in a better mood, the breath will change. So you work with the breath either directly by focusing on it, or indirectly by putting the mind in the right mood.

Ajaan Suwat talks about this a lot. He said you sit down to meditate and

you've got to get the mind into the proper frame to do the meditation with a sense of inspiration that this is something really good.

You want the topic that inspires you to be related to the Dhamma so it doesn't send you off away from the present moment but actually brings you back. For instance, the Buddha talks about taking the Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Sangha as objects of recollection.

You could think about the life story of the Buddha and focus on the details you find inspiring—whether it's the fact that he gave up all of his power and wealth, or that he was kind to people of all kinds.

There's that great story of an outcaste. He sees the Buddha coming down the street. And as an outcaste he has to get out of the way, so he scrunches himself up in the wall on the side of the street as much as possible. The Buddha stops in front of him, and the outcaste scrunches himself up some more, for fear that the Buddha's going to take offence at him. But instead, the Buddha wants to teach him. After being taught by the Buddha, he goes and practices and becomes an arahant. The fact that the Buddha didn't overlook him: You might find that inspiring. I do.

Or you might be inspired by the time when, after he'd been practicing austerities for six long years, he got to the point where he realized that no one had ever endured more extreme austerities than he had at that point. There are some people who would take that as a point of pride. But he said, "No. This isn't working." He was willing to put aside any pride that had kept him going with the austerities, and could ask himself, "Is there another way?"

So there are a lot of incidents in the Buddha's life story that you can take as inspiration.

The same with the Sangha. You read the poems in the Theragatha and the Therigatha, and in some cases they're a lot more approachable than the Buddha was in the sense that you can imagine yourself in their place more than you can in his. They talk about a lot of the anguish they went through, and the troubles and the disappointments and the frustration they had with their practice, and yet they were able to get around them.

You tell yourself, "Okay, if they did it, so can I."

As for the Buddha, you can tell yourself, "Okay, what was it that made him special?" It was that he kept looking at his actions, looking at the state of his mind, and asking himself what he could do differently—which is not all that different from what we're doing now.

This is how the reflection, once it calms you down, gets you focused back in on the breath, back in the present moment. Because this is where the Buddha gained his awakening: focusing on the breath.

The same with the members of the Sangha. How did they overcome their frustration? By finally sitting down and being willing to look at their minds

and give up whatever it was that was hanging over them or pulling them back. This kind of thinking is what brings you back to the present moment.

Or you might think about the Dhamma. What is it in the Dhamma that you find inspiring? What particular teaching do you find inspiring? You might run that through your mind for a while.

When you run across something that provides a good perspective on some of the problems you've been having in the course of the day or some of your issues that you bring to the practice, it helps you to see these things in a different light, so that the issues don't seem so large. You find it easier to put them aside and you're back with the breath.

Three other topics the Buddha recommends are recollection of generosity, recollection of virtue, and recollection of the devas.

In terms of the generosity and virtue, you think about times when you have been generous and have been virtuous, i.e., times you gave something not because you had to, or because it was the custom or because it was expected but simply because you wanted to. And you think of the good that came from that.

At the same time, you realize that this was probably your first experience of what it's like to feel free. In other words, you're not being driven by your selfishness, you're not being driven by your worries and concerns or by the sense that you have to give.

This is one of the really nicest things about the Buddha's sense of generosity, that generosity is free. There are no shoulds around generosity. You give where you feel inspired.

A lot of people lose sight of that. They say that as Buddhists we have to do this, we have to help here, have to help there, that it's somehow our moral obligation. Well, the Buddha was not in a position to place moral obligations on people. He was simply pointing out that this is the way things work.

And he did everything he could to protect the freedom of generosity. When monks are asked, "Where should I give this?" they're supposed to answer, "Give wherever you feel inspired, you feel it would be well-used or people would take good care of it." That's it.

Even the issue of social action comes under the area of generosity. That, too, is a free gift. You can decide whether you feel inspired or not. In that way, giving is an act of freedom.

Of course, you look at your life and if you have only one or two instances where you gave something because you really felt like it, it's hard to milk those one or two instances for a really good feeling that you can then take back into the meditation.

This means you have to look at your life to see if there are other areas where you can be more generous. In other words, keep your stories of generosity fresh, so that you don't have refer way back to incidents years ago.

And with virtue, it's a similar sort of thing. You realize there were times when you could have gotten away with something that wasn't quite honest or aboveboard, was actually harmful to yourself or other people, but you didn't do it, out of a sense of principle. That sense of honor is an important source of inspiration. It provides an awful lot of nourishment for the mind.

I was reading a while back about a book on honor. It covered largely the old Southern sense of honor that if somebody insulted you or your relatives, you would have to go and kill them. That kind of honor is really dumb.

Here we're talking about the honor that comes from refraining from harm. That's something that really is honorable and noble. These words—"honor," "nobility"—have kind of disappeared from our society, so it's good to revive them and get some nourishment from them, so that you can reflect on the fact that you have principles and you hold by them. That gives you some nourishment, that gives you some encouragement.

It also gives you a real basis for self-esteem—not the kind of floating-around self-esteem where they put stars on your test papers. It's the self-esteem that comes from knowing that you're basically a good person, you've got some good qualities in here and you're acting on them. That calms the mind down.

And how are you going to maintain that sense of honor? How are you going to maintain that ability to be generous? It depends on the strength of mind you develop. And the best place to do that is right here. So in this way, the thinking brings you back.

Even the recollection of the devas is meant to bring you back to the breath. Because what it comes down to is reflecting on the qualities that make people into devas, the qualities that got devas to where they are right now, that enabled them back when they were human beings to be take a birth as a deva. These, basically, are the rewards that come from goodness. And then you reflect on the fact that you have some of those qualities of goodness as well.

In addition to generosity and virtue, these qualities include a sense of conviction in the Buddha's awakening, learning about the Dhamma, developing your discernment, developing the attitudes of unlimited goodwill, compassion, empathetic joy, and equanimity.

These are the things that raise your level while you're here as a human being. And again where do they come from? From the qualities you develop in the mind through meditation.

So you can spread thoughts of goodwill in all directions for a while. This is why we have that chant every evening before the meditation, to remind ourselves of our motivation for being here. We want a happiness that's harmless, a happiness that doesn't harm anybody at all.

Where are you going to find that? You have to look inside. If you want the power to be compassionate, where are you gain that so you don't burn out?

You've got to look inside.

So you can think about these topics for a while, and as you think about them in the right way, that brings you back around.

In the meantime, as you've been thinking about topics that are soothing to the mind, uplifting to the mind, the way you breathe is going to change. You come back to the breath and you realize there's nothing much you have to do in terms of adjusting it anymore. It feels just right. So you settle down with that sense of ease in the body.

And then try to maintain it. There's a Thai word *prakhawng*, which means that you gently hold something—and sometimes you don't even hold it. Like a baby walking along taking its first steps: You're right there hovering around it to catch it if it falls but not pulling it, because you want the child to learn how to walk. You simply hover around it.

So you want to hover around that good sense of breathing. And don't let your preconceived notions about breath get in the way. This is one of the problems we often have: that we start focusing on the breath and all of sudden things seize up because we're imposing our preconceived notions.

So even thinking about in-breath and out-breath: If that's a problem, just say, "Quality of breath energy in the body. It flows in, flows out. There's no clear line between in and out." Okay, that's fine. In fact, the less of a clear line there is between the in-and-out breath, the easier it is to get the breath to calm down, to settle in, and to fill the whole body.

So you can either work at the breath directly by directing your thoughts to it or you can work on the breath indirectly by directing your thoughts to something else that's calming, soothing, and ultimately brings you circling back to the breath.

As with those qualities of the devas: Where do they come from? They come from qualities you build into the mind. What are you going to need to develop those qualities? Well, you need a lot of mindfulness and alertness. This is where you get it: at the breath.

So as you sit down, take stock of where your mind is, where your breath is, and how they get along. If you find that the mind can settle in with the breath right away, okay, go there. If not, give yourself some time to think your way into the proper mood.

In this way, you expand your repertoire as a meditator and develop a range of skills that you can apply to any situation, so that your proficiency in the meditation becomes more and more reliable and all-around.