

## *The Breath Soufflé*

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The Buddha's instructions on breath meditation start out with four steps. The first two are really simple. You simply discern when the breath is long, when it's short. In other words, you're practicing your skills as an observer. Just try to be with the present moment so that you can see the differences among the different ways you breathe. In addition to long and short, you can try fast, slow; heavy, light; deep, shallow. Just get the mind in the position of being an observer.

When the Buddha taught breath meditation to Rahula, he prefaced his remarks by saying, "Make your mind like earth." In other words, whatever comes up, you don't react. Just watch. But then you move on. And it's in the moving on that the breath meditation gets more complicated.

In the next two steps, you train yourself. In other words, you set a goal in mind and you try to live up to the goal. You have to have a mature attitude toward goals. This is one of our problems. As Westerners, we're taught to expect everything to be instant. We want it right now and sometimes we want it before right now. If we don't like something, we start getting upset. We either turn our anger on things or we turn it on ourselves. Ajaan Chah noticed this when he was teaching Westerners, that they needed to learn a lot of patience and a lot of equanimity so that they could observe things. If you don't have the patience to sit with something unpleasant, you're never going to understand it. And if you don't understand it, how are you going to treat it skillfully?

But assuming that you are ready to watch the breath, you then play with the breath, because that's what the two next steps are: You're basically playing with the breath. Then you find you learn a lot more about the meditation. It moves on from just observing to creating a path. As the Buddha said, the path to the end of suffering is something you put together. The word he used, *sankhara*, can also mean fabrication, construction. You put these things together. The putting together requires effort. It requires all the factors of the path.

So in the third step, you tell yourself, "I'll breathe in aware of the whole body." That talking to yourself the Buddha calls verbal fabrication. And you're going to be aware of the whole body as you breathe in and the whole body as you breathe out. This is where Ajaan Lee's instructions on dealing with the different energies in the body are helpful, because in the fourth step, you're going to try to calm the effect of the breath on the body. So you want to be really sensitive to how the energies move in the body as you breathe in, as you breathe out. He has you start

with the breath coming in at the neck going down the spine. But you can ask yourself, if you visualize that, does it help? Does it make it easier to settle down? If that kind of visualization doesn't help, you can try others. Think of the breath coming in different spots in the body: in the middle of the forehead, the top of the head.

If there's a place where there's a pain in your body, you can try having the breath coming in right there and going right through it. Or if that makes the pain worse, you can move to the other side. In other words, if there's a pain in your left hip, focus on your right. If there's a pain in your stomach, focus on the back. Think of the breath energy flowing smoothly there. This helps you get aware of the whole body. Sometimes instead of working with the individual parts, you just think, "whole body," and try to be fully aware of the whole body. Notice what that does to your sense of what's a comfortable way of breathing, because sometimes a way of breathing that feels comfortable when you're focused on one spot doesn't feel so comfortable when you're aware of the body as a whole. Think of the breathing as a whole-body process.

There are lots of different ways of approaching this. You can work through the body section by section, or start from the whole body and then move in from there to focus on specific problems. Ideally, though, what you want is to be able to be aware of the whole body all the way through the in-breath, all the way through the out-. Have a sense that the breathing is all around you. You're not ensconced someplace up in your head, looking down at the breath of the body. You're *in* the whole body, all the way down to the tips of your toes.

When you're feeling the breathing move around you, this is a really useful step, because once you're fully aware of the whole body, it's a lot harder to go slipping off into the past and the future. If your awareness is one little spot, that little spot can move around pretty fast and go lots of different places. But if you're thinking, "whole body" all the way in, all the way out, it's almost as if your awareness is too large to move into the past or the future. Because what happens? What is a past or future thought? You basically lose the context of the body and you create another world. As long as you keep reinforcing, "whole body, whole body, whole body," it's very hard to slip into those other worlds.

As you become more aware of the breathing energies in the different parts of the body, that moves you into the fourth step, which is to calm bodily fabrication. That can mean two things. One, you simply calm the rate of your breathing. Two, you calm the effect that the breathing has on your sensation of the body. And here if you're aware of the different energies flowing through the body, if you can think of them all connecting, you find that the need to breathe in and out gets weaker

and weaker. You're not starving the body of breath energy. You're simply allowing everything to open up so that things flow smoothly in all directions.

The sense of the breathing throughout the body feels coordinated. If there's a lack of energy in one part of the body, the breath will move very quickly from another part into the part where there's a lack, without your having to expend a lot of energy on breathing in and pulling the breath or exaggerating the breath. As long as the mind is very still, you're using very little oxygen. It's not that you're stifling the breath. If you find that you're stifling the breath, stop. Go ahead, let the body breathe as much as it wants. But when things feel really connected, and the mind is very still, the breath will naturally calm down on its own without your having to force it to calm down.

As the texts say, you get eventually to a point where you don't feel like you're breathing in and out at all. If you can be very still and stay there, you've learned how to fabricate a skillful state of mind: grounded, still, all around. Then the next step is to learn how to maintain that. This is how the breathing moves from mindfulness of breathing into concentration based on the breathing.

Actually, it's concentration from the very beginning. The Buddha doesn't make any clear distinction between concentration and mindfulness practice. After all, mindfulness has the role of remembering to do what's skillful and to abandon what's unskillful. If something unskillful comes up, you're mindful to bring it to an end. If something skillful has not come up, you make it come into being and then you try to maintain it.

These are the duties of mindfulness. These duties often get sloughed over in the more popular descriptions of mindfulness. But they're there. The Buddha teaches them as the duties of mindfulness when mindfulness is really in charge. This is what it does: It tries to develop skillful qualities. In other words, it doesn't just watch things arise and pass away. There are certain things that it wants to *make* arise and wants to *prevent* from passing away; and other things, unskillful things, that it wants to prevent from arising and make hurry up to pass away as quickly as possible. This is how mindfulness blends into concentration, because the concentration the Buddha describes is something skillful you can develop: a whole-body awareness with a sense of well-being that fills the body.

In creating this and maintaining it, you learn a lot about the mind's habits of fabrication because you're engaged in all three forms of fabrication. There's physical fabrication, which is the effect of the breath on the body; verbal fabrication, what you talk to yourself about; and then mental fabrication, the feelings you create through the breathing, through your attention to the breathing, and the perceptions you hold in mind to be aware of the breathing as a

whole-body process. They're all right here. We take these fabrications—which we normally do out of ignorance, causing ourselves stress and suffering—and now we're doing them skillfully. We're turning them into the path. If you think of the word “aggregates” as being like the gravel they use to make a road, the difference is between putting all the gravel into a big bag on your shoulders to carry it around and actually putting it down on the ground so that you can walk on it. We're learning to do these fabrications with awareness, with knowledge. We're putting them on the ground to smooth our path.

At the same time, we're putting the mind in a position where it can see other things going on, because one of the basic prerequisites of this skill is when something comes up that's not related to the breath, you just let it go. No matter how fascinating or insistent or whatever it may be, just say, “This is not the time.” Learn how to react as little as possible to those things as you let them go, so that they don't disturb the concentration. But you do let them go.

And you do hang on to the concentration, because when the mind is in this state—centered but broad—you see things going on that you didn't see before. And you can see through them, in the sense of seeing that where you used to get hooked by things, the hook is not that interesting anymore. The pleasure that comes from having this sense of centered but broad awareness gives you the food you need right now so that you're not hungry to nibble on whatever bait comes by. This allows you to step back from a lot of the processes going on in the mind that otherwise would pull you around.

So even though the state of mind we're talking about here is just a concentration state, there is some discernment involved in getting here. You learn things about the mind by training it, in the same way that you learn about horses by training them or about different foods by fixing them. When you learn about eggs, how do you learn about eggs? Do you just sit and watch the egg? No. You put it in a pan. You put it in a saucepan. You put it in a frying pan. You try to make a soufflé. You try to make an omelet. You try to make meringues—all kinds of things you can do with eggs. The more things you can do with eggs, the more skills you develop around eggs, then the more you understand eggs.

It's same with the mind. The more skill you develop in getting the mind to settle down and to cut through the issues that prevent it from settling down, the more you're going to know your mind. But particularly, the more you're going to know about how to train the mind not to create suffering for itself.

So you can think of this as your soufflé. Make it light and expansive and good all the way through.