

Shaping Your Breath, Shaping Your Life

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Breathing is one of the few processes in the body that's both automatic and is subject to your control. The way the heart beats has very little to do with your internal sense of how you picture the body. The way you digest your food has very little to do with how you picture it to yourself. But the breathing is very much affected by your internal perception of what's happening when you breathe and what has to happen for the breath to come in.

Often if you ask a child to breathe deep, the child will not only extend its stomach but also pull its shoulders up, or sometimes it'll pull its stomach in as it expands the ribcage. It all depends on how the child pictures the process of breathing to itself. Well, we were children at one point and we've carried a lot of those pictures along with us as we grew up. When you tell someone to focus on the breath, immediately those pictures get kicked into action. This is why one of the important parts of learning how to focus on the breath is also learning how to skillfully picture the breath to yourself.

Ajaan Lee recommends some ways of imagining the breath energy moving through the body. This doesn't mean moving the air through the body; you're moving the energy. Think of the energy coming in the back of the neck right at the base of the skull, going down the spine; coming in at the middle of the chest, going down through the heart, the stomach, the intestines, down to the base of the spine. Think of it flowing down the shoulders, out the arms, flowing down the legs. Those are the instructions he gives in Method 2.

In his Dhamma talks, though, Ajaan Lee gives other instructions. When you breathe in, think of the energy coming from the navel up the front of the body; then from the feet, up the legs, and up the back, up the spine, up to the skull. The lesson you can draw from all this is that imagining the breath to yourself in different ways is appropriate for different conditions in the body.

When Ajaan Lee wrote Method 2, he'd just recovered from a heart attack. He'd gone into the jungle, walked three days in. Soon after arriving, he had a heart attack. No doctors around, no medicine. The only way he was able to treat his disease was with his breath energy. So his instructions for breathing down the back are related very much to that.

Now, your physical condition right now may correspond to what he was suffering at the time or it may not. In which case you can ask yourself, "What way of imagining the breath would be helpful for me right now?"

When I had malaria in Thailand, I found that the breathing process became very laborious because the malaria parasite was eating up my red blood cells. The oxygen was not getting to the muscles that were doing the breathing, and they were getting fatigued. I realized I had to imagine a new way of breathing. So I just thought, "Suppose the breath came in in the middle

of the forehead? Suppose it came down from the top of the head? What muscles would have to be used in order to get the breath in, or to allow it in?" That thought allowed the muscles that had been doing the work to rest, while other muscles picked up the work.

I've also found when there was an injury in a part of the body that it helped to think of the breath energy coming in right there at the injury. You don't have to pull it from anywhere else. And then from there allow it to spread through any sense of tension or tightness around the injury and out through the rest of the body.

So there's up-flowing breath and down-flowing breath. Try to get a sense, when you breathe in, if your picture of the way you breathe is aggravating the problem or actually helping it. What you want is a place where you can settle in and feel at ease in the body. If your back is feeling weak, think about the breath energy coming up the back, so that you feel more secure here, more stable and solid.

Because this is your space. The way you sense the body from within is something that nobody else can sense. But even though it's your space, you often let other people invade your space with their energies. This is when you start feeling threatened just by the presence of other people around you. You're not fully inhabiting the body and so their energy finds an opening to move in. An important skill in the breath meditation is that once you've found a comfortable breath, think of its spreading to fill the whole body at the same time as your awareness spreads to fill the whole body.

Now, you find that your awareness has two types. There's a background awareness and then there's the more focused intentional awareness. You want to bring the two of those together. The background awareness is already filling your body. Your intentional awareness has a tendency to feel like it's in one spot. So when you tell yourself to focus on the breath, that intentional energy in one spot feels like it's looking at the rest of the awareness of the body and it's creating a separation. What you've got to do is think of the intentional focus backing into the background energy, because that's actually where it came from. Then it's easier to think of the whole body being filled with awareness of a conscious, intentional type.

As one step in this direction, you might start out focusing on two points in the body. I knew an old woman in Thailand, a retired schoolteacher, who had very quick powers of concentration. She'd sit down and bang! she was in strong concentration. She told me her trick was to think of one spot in the middle of the head and one spot at the base of the spine and of a line connecting the two, like an electric cord connecting two poles of a battery. Then she'd focus her awareness on those two spots. It was as if her mind had two hands and she filled both hands with something to do, and there were no hands left over to think about anything else. She said if she focused only on one spot, it was as if she had a free hand, and the free hand would start grabbing on to other things.

So give that a try if you have trouble settling down. If you like her two spots, use those two spots. Or you can choose any two spots you want. But you may find that the task of maintaining both spots at once can be pretty riveting.

From there you can think of various ways of noticing when you breathe in: Do you pull the energy up? Do you push the energy down? When you breathe in, at the end of the breath do you tend to pinch the end of the breath to mark the fact that it's distinct from the out-breath? Can you let the in-breath just flow into the out-breath? Breathe out as much as you can, and the body will automatically reach a spot where it's going to breathe in on its own, so you don't have to *make* it breathe in. In that way, the breathing process becomes more seamless.

There are lots of ways of playing around. And it's not just playing around. You're learning something important, in the same way that scientists learn when they play around with things. They're experimenting.

The Buddha talks about how you develop your establishing of mindfulness. You make yourself be aware of the origination of phenomena and the passing away of phenomena as it relates to whatever your frame of reference is. Sometimes the word "origination" is translated as "arising," which gives a sense you're simply sitting there passively watching things coming and going. But that's not what the word means. It means the process of causation. How are things caused in the body? How are things caused in your feelings? In your mind? As you know, if you're going to find causal relationships, you have to play with the factors.

So, play with your perceptions. Adjust them. Perceive things in one way for a while; perceive them in another way for a while. Play with your sense of the form of the body: Breathe in one way for a while; breathe in another way for a while. You'll get a sense of how different perceptions and different ways of breathing have an impact on how you sense the body, on what's going on in the mind. You'll get more of a handle on things. Because that's why we're looking for cause and effect: It's to get a handle on how we can create a path out of all this—a path where we feel secure, and the mind is in a much better position to make skillful choices in what it says, what it does, what it thinks about, how it gets more skillful in its meditation. It's all a seamless whole.

The Buddha's teachings on karma are not just a curiosity unrelated to the meditation. They're very much related to the meditation. He taught karma in a way that was not deterministic. In other words, past actions lead to tendencies that get mixed up with other causal factors, other actions either further from the past or more in the present. A combination of these tendencies is what produces what you experience. If karma were totally deterministic, we couldn't be sitting here making choices at all. But because things have tendencies like this and because your present karma plays a role in how you experience what's coming in from the past: That gives you some freedom of choice.

It also means that if you've got past bad karma you don't *have* to suffer from it—if you train your mind well. As the Buddha says, you train it in discernment, you train it in virtue, you

train it in the unlimited (by which it means unlimited goodwill, compassion, empathetic joy, and equanimity), and you train it so that it's not easily overcome by pleasure or pain. With that state of mind, any past bad karma, when it yields its results, is barely going to have an impact on the mind at all.

So we're training ourselves in ways of learning how not to suffer, how not to pile more suffering on top of what we've already got. As the Buddha said, all too often a physical pain comes and we get worked up about it. Well, the first pain was an arrow, and then you get worked up and that's more arrows that you shoot yourself with. A lot of the teaching is learning how even though the pain may be there, you don't have to suffer from it. That's related to the teachings on karma as well.

The Buddha denied not only determinism or fatalism, but also materialism, the idea that everything is the result of material forces. If it were, the mind would just be on the receiving end of everything. But here the mind can make choices, and it can use those choices to impress changes on its experience. That's why the Buddha said, in the first verse in the Dhammapada, "The mind is the forerunner of all phenomena." The way you approach experience is going to determine whether or not you suffer from it—and you can learn how to approach it in new ways, which again is why we're meditating.

The Buddha also taught karma to counter the idea of no causality at all—that things were just random, that pleasure and pain come without any causes, so you just grab the pleasure when you can: That was a teaching that was around at his time, too. But if you believe that, there's no skill that you can develop in meditating. Meditating would be random: You sit down and whatever happens is going to happen. There'd be no way to develop any skill, there'd be no patterns that you could learn and use to your advantage.

The Buddha also taught karma to counter racism. It's not the case that people of one race or one caste or one social group have all the good karma or are the only ones who can attain high spiritual attainments. Everybody, regardless, can gain those attainments. It has to do with the quality of your intention, which is something we can all change.

All of this is very relevant to how we're meditating right now. So learn how to use this teaching that's very empowering. You have the power to shape your experience. You learn how you're already shaping it, and then you use your ingenuity to figure out new and better ways of shaping it. The Buddha gives you some help, but sometimes the particulars, like issues around the breath, are things you've got to learn how to explore things on your own. But we explore not just to play around; we play around not just to play around. We play around to learn. From learning, then we can shape the rest of our experience in good ways as well, even while we're not here meditating.

Learn how to inhabit your body fully, so that it is your place. Nobody else can invade it. And then you'll go through the world with a lot more solidity, both in body and in mind.