

Tranquility & Insight with the Breath

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The breath is a theme for tranquility, and it's also a theme for insight. When the Buddha describes the steps of breath meditation, he says that you become sensitive to bodily fabrication—that's the breath; and mental fabrication—that's perceptions and feelings. And the instructions themselves are a kind of verbal fabrication, where you talk to yourself and tell yourself how you're going to breathe, what you're going to focus on.

The fact that this is all involved in fabrication is the basis for insight. Because that's what insight is: understanding the ways the mind fabricates its experience.

But those steps of breath meditation also involve the act of calming fabrication. You get sensitive to the breath, then you calm it. You get sensitive to the perceptions you hold in mind, that are keeping you with the breath, and the feelings that come up from the breath, and you learn how to calm those, so that they have a soothing and peaceful effect on the mind.

So in that case, you're working on tranquility. And ideally, the two processes—gaining insight and gaining tranquility—work together. But our minds are not ideal. Sometimes they need to lean more in one direction than the other. For instance, when you're really tired, it's a good time to just settle down and rest for a bit. Find some place in the body that's comfortable: where you feel the breath coming in and going out, or you feel the breath energy spreading from some spot in the body out to the rest of the body, and it feels good. Let yourself rest there.

Ajaan Lee's image is of having some money and wanting to start an orchard. If you make the mistake of investing in enough trees to fill the whole orchard, you're setting yourself up for a fall. A drought may come, the weather may be too hot or too cold, and all the trees may die. Whereas if you start out planting just one corner of the orchard—making sure the trees there are healthy, and you have enough water on hand even if there's a drought, and you can protect the trees enough even when it's extremely hot or extremely cold—eventually those trees will give you fruit. And then from the seeds of the fruit you can plant other trees. And bit, by bit, your orchard grows.

So in this case, you're working just on one spot in the body, making it comfortable, and then you're hunkering down there. This is going to be your spot and this is where you rest. Then, once the mind is rested, you can ask yourself, "Can I spread this out?" Ideally, the kind of concentration we're working for is not just one spot. It's a full-body awareness. It's anchored in one spot, but its

range fills the whole body. It's like looking at a picture: You may be focusing on one spot in the picture, but you see the whole picture. Your vision isn't limited just to that one little laser-small beam of your focus. So you want to focus, but you want the range of your awareness to cover the body so that you can have a sense of whether the breath is flowing well or not.

If the attention is too narrow, you can build up a lot of tension in other parts of the body, and you come out of the meditation feeling tired, because you were tensing everything else up so that you could stay focused on your one spot. To prevent that, you want to be able to be aware of everything, all around.

This also enables you to understand what's going on in the mind, because there are many levels of fabrication in the mind. The mind puts things together on many levels. It's like a big corporation with lots of different people contributing this little piece or that little piece to the final job. Sometimes they're doing totally separate jobs, sometimes there's no organization at all, but there are lots of little people working in there. And as you're more aware of the whole body, you begin to see areas of the mind as well. You develop a whole-mind awareness, too, of what's going on.

In particular, you begin to see how you have certain patterns for fabricating things that you hold onto regardless of whether they're getting good results. That's what clinging is all about. It's like an addiction: something you're used to doing even though it doesn't necessarily give you a lot of happiness. It gives you a little hit of pleasure, otherwise you wouldn't go for it, but it's simply what you know, it's what you're familiar with, and so when there's a little trouble in the world, you go for your addiction.

Your ways of looking at things: These, too, are fabricated, mainly out of verbal fabrication, but also mental fabrication. You need to see those types of fabrication in action. Otherwise, you can't get past them. One way of working with them, of course, is by starting out with how you perceive the breath and how you talk to yourself about the breath while you're meditating, and learning how to question your perceptions. If the breath is uncomfortable, what image do you have in mind as you breathe? Can you change that image?

As I said just now, we think about the breath coming in from outside, but sometimes it's also good to think about the breath energy originating at some spot in the body, such as the resting spots of the breath that Ajaan Lee talks about: down around the navel, the tip of the breastbone, the base of the throat, or right in the middle of the head at the palate.

When the breath energy starts spreading in your body as the air starts coming in, where does the energy in the body start? And does it feel okay? Does it feel like

it has to battle its way through the rest of the body in order to get things going? Or does it flow smoothly? Which are the parts of the body that you can relax? This way you learn that you can change your perception of the breath and you get better results. You've learned a lesson about fabrication. You've also learned a lesson about clinging: You were holding onto an old image that was getting in the way.

As you get more sensitive to this process of fabrication in the breath meditation, you begin to look at other ways you have of holding onto things outside: ideas about yourself, ideas about the world that you hold onto tight as part of your identity, and you're afraid that you would lose your identity if you changed them. You can begin to ask yourself, "Do I really need those? Do I really need that identity? Am I causing myself suffering by holding onto these ideas?"

No matter how right they may be, there are times when you're holding onto something and you're right—but it's totally useless. It serves no purpose at all, aside from weighing the mind down. This is where you begin to understand what craving and clinging are. With clinging, it's not as if your mind had a hand that it uses to grasp onto things. The mind has habits—ways of thinking, ways of perceiving, ways of identifying with different feelings—and those habits are the clinging. They're just actions that the mind does over and over and over again. Clinging is an activity. It's a repeated karma—often knee-jerk karma, because we're so used to doing it, because we think, "Well, that's just the way the mind works," or "That's just the way things have to be," or "This is who I am." All of those ideas are clinging, too. Think of each of those ideas as an activity, and ask yourself, "Is it really worth it? Would I be better off without it?"

These are some of the lessons we learn by working with the breath. We learn how to find a place for the mind to settle down and rest when it needs to rest. And at the same time, we learn how it can begin to understand the fabrication of finding a resting spot: how you work with the breath, how you work with your thoughts, work with your perceptions, so that the mind can rest well, and can rest in deeper and deeper levels—like peeling away the layers of an onion.

In the course of doing that, you begin to see how the mind works in general. You're seeing the mind in its actions, and you begin to look at your ideas *as* actions, choices you've made. Even when you're convinced that you're right about your ideas, there are times when you should let them go. Because after all, the duty of the mind is not necessarily to try to create a correct image of the world that it's going to carry around all the time. The Buddha gives you some ideas about the world that are useful for the path, and you pick them up when they're useful, when they're needed, and then you put them down when they're not.

Learn to develop this ability to put things down. Otherwise, you're like the old Thai story of the old grandma who's carrying a bale of straw. She has the idea someday she's going to need some straw, and so she carries a whole bale of straw around on her back all the time. She's bent over, she's tired, she's so old she can hardly walk, but she keeps that straw on her back because she feels someday she's going to need some straw.

If you're wise, you find a safe place to put the straw, where you know that it'll be there when you need it. You pick it up when you need it; you put it down when you don't. This way the mind is a lot lighter. And you find that the mind, when it's lightened and made peaceful through insight like this, is a lot more stable and a lot more peaceful than simply getting it tranquilized. Because even when the mind is simply tranquil with the breath, there's always the sense that you've got some loads on the mind. You've let them down for a little bit, but they're right there, and you're going to have to pick them right up. But when you finally learn how to let them go through insight, there's a realization and a relaxation that comes with that realization, that you're never going to have to pick those things up again.

It's peace in both cases, but peace of a different kind. So we work on both these processes—trying to get the mind tranquil and trying to gain insights into fabrication. And as I said, the breath is a really good place to start, and to stay, while you're learning how to master them and gain their full benefits.