

Stay

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You've probably noticed that when you tell a dog to stay or to sit, it gets very tense. A sitting position that it would normally take without any problem suddenly becomes unbearable. It squiggles and it squirms. Well, the mind is like that, too. You tell it to stay with the breath and it's going to squiggle and squirm around the breath. And because it's so tense around the breath, it can't maintain this position for long.

This is why Ajaan Lee teaches working with the breath, playing with the breath. See what different kinds of breathing there are, and which ways of breathing have the best effect on the body, best effect on the mind. This gives you something to explore, something to get interested in, something to get intrigued about. Something as simple as the breath can have such an impact on your health, your body, the mood of the mind. And as you get interested in it, you find that you're staying with the breath without having to think about making it stay.

So ask yourself questions. This is what attention is all about. In the Buddha's vocabulary, the word "attention" relates to which questions you pay attention to. He never taught bare attention, because there are no bare questions. If you're thinking about trying to put an end to suffering, there are either questions that are appropriate or questions that are inappropriate.

Inappropriate questions have to do with things like: What is the nature of the world? Is it eternal, non-eternal, finite, infinite? Did it start at one point in time, or has it been going on for eternity? Does it have a creator? And how about you, who are you? What are you? Do you exist? Do you not exist? What were you in a previous lifetime? What are you going to be in a future lifetime? Or *were* you in a previous lifetime? Is there such a thing? It's interesting that the Buddha puts those topics under inappropriate questions to ask, even though he does teach about rebirth, past lifetimes and future lifetimes. But the question of whether what you were in a past lifetime or will be in a future lifetime: That's an issue he says is not worth attending to. Because however you answer that questions, it's

going to pull you into what he calls a thicket and a writhing of views.

The questions that are worth asking are questions about stress, its cause, its cessation, and the path to its cessation. Is there such a thing as the total cessation of stress? And if so, how can it be brought about? Those questions are worthwhile. For example, as you're working with the breath right now, an appropriate question is, "Am I creating any unnecessary stress in the body, any unnecessary stress in the mind by the way I breathe?" That's getting you started on the right questions for appropriate attention.

So try to bring some appropriate attention to your breath. Not just bare attention. Appropriate attention—asking some useful questions about it. In that way you'll find that you can achieve a balance around the breath that's much more natural without your having to clamp down. And for a while, that will be what keeps you with the breath: that thinking, or what the Buddha calls directed thought and evaluation.

Then you get to the point where the breath is comfortable or as comfortable as it's going to be, and its effect on the body is as comfortable as it's going to be, and no matter how much more you try to adjust it, you can't make it any better. Ajaan Fuang's image is of putting water into a big water jar. You pour it in, pour it in, pour it in, and then finally the jar is full. Now, you could keep pouring water in if you wanted to, but it would all spill out. The jar can hold only that much. So you stop pouring the water in.

That becomes the next skill to develop in your concentration: learning how to put the directed thought and evaluation aside, and just try to be with the breathing. This creates a different relationship with the breath. Before, the breath was one thing and you were watching it from outside. Now you come to have the sense that your awareness of the breath and the breath are one thing, or that you are one with the breath. Then you try to maintain your balance there with a minimum amount of directed thought and evaluation. You don't have to direct your thoughts anymore, because you're there with the breath, but the evaluation, here, becomes more subtle. Subtle in the sense you have to ask yourself: How can I maintain my sense of balance here? Because it's very easy to tip into the past, or tip into the future, and lose your balance. In other words, you start pushing to,

“What’s next, what’s next, what’s next?” and you fall off the breath. Or you try to latch onto the sensation of your last breath, which just creates unnecessary tension in the body. So you want to learn how to maintain a sense of balance right on the present moment, without pushing forward or pulling back.

In the beginning, you have a very strong sense of how fragile your sense of balance is, and so you have to be extremely careful. You don’t want to rush into the next breath. You want to be right here with this breath, but be very, very much right here, this moment, this moment, this moment. Pare down the length of each moment as much as you can, until you find that things begin to solidify here in this very present moment, and you lose the sense that you’re going to fall off. You feel more secure here.

It’s like learning how to walk a tightrope. In the beginning, it’s very easy to fall off, but as you get more and more confident, and gain a better and better sense of your own instinctive sense of balance, you bring that confidence and instinctive sense to bear on what you’re doing. You find that it gets easier and easier, and the amount of tension can be relaxed. You can be just there with the breath. Relax into it. There will be a sense of fullness and a sense of ease, but your main concern is to be one with the breath.

One of the worst things you can do at that point is to leave the breath to go to the fullness and the ease. It’s like building a tall building and then seeing that there’s a cloud around the building. The cloud looks nice and soft, and so you go jump into the cloud—and of course, you fall right through. So stay with the breath. The ease will do its work. You don’t have to wallow in it. You don’t have to gulp it down. It’ll do its work on the body; it’ll do its work on the mind. You just try to maintain your sense of balance with the breath.

In some cases, that sense of fullness will be very mild, and as it goes away you hardly even notice it. Other times it’s stronger, to the point where it gets excessive. That’s when you tune the mind in to a more subtle frequency of the breath—in the same way that you’d tune a radio into a more calming station after listening to a lot of hard rock—and you find that the mind can settle-in there.

The mind, itself, is equanimous. There’s a sense of ease in the body, and that gradually grows fainter and fainter, until everything just stops. The breath stops.

Your thinking stops. There's just the perception that holds you there. There's a sense of awareness filling the whole body. The breath fills the whole body, and it's because everything feels connected inside that the breathing can stop, without your feeling any lack, any need to breathe. Sometimes you may find this startling, and as soon as a startled thought goes through the mind, you have to start breathing again. But if you remind yourself that the body's oxygen needs have been greatly reduced because your brain is the main user of oxygen and now it's quiet, then you can stay still with more confidence.

In the range of the breath energy filling the body, everything feels connected, so if there's a lack anywhere, it's immediately made up from the energy someplace else in the body. Whatever oxygen you need is being picked up through the skin. Breath energy fills the body, but without a sense of being stuffed by it. It just feels very natural and very balanced.

This is how you get the mind to stay. You don't clamp down, but at the same time you're not too lackadaisical.

Again, it's like training a dog. If you don't train the dog at all, it's just going to make a big mess in the house. You have to ride herd on it, keep watch over it. But at the same time, you don't beat it, you don't force it down. To change the image, it's like training a child. You give the child something to work with, something to play with. The child doesn't think of running away because it's fascinated by the game, fascinated by the work you've given it. Then, when it's tired of playing, it can rest.

The difference here being, of course, that when you're resting you're fully awake, fully alert, but there's no felt need to think about anything much at all, because you're getting strength from the stillness. There's a sense of strong nourishment that comes when the mind settles down. A sense of lightness. Openness. This is how you get the mind to stay in such a way that it can stay for long periods of time without squiggling or squirming. And the advantage of learning this skill is that you can give the mind a genuine rest.

We think so much as we go through the day. We take in so much information, and so much greed, aversion, and delusion gets aroused—or not only gets aroused, but actually goes out looking for trouble. All of that in-and-out, in-and-out, wears

down the mind. So now you're finally trying to give the mind a place of balance, right here, right in the middle of everything, but not feeling besieged by anything at all. Instead, you're radiating a sense of well-being. This heals whatever scars you picked up from the day. It gives you the strength both to keep on going, and to keep on going well.