

## *How the Breath Helps You to Die Well*

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There are meditation traditions that have you look directly at your mind and they say of those of us who are focusing on the breath, “You’re going to spend all of your life focusing on your breath? What are you going to do when you die? When you die, the breath’s going to leave you. And you’ll be left with nothing.”

Now, if all we learned as we focused on the breath was about the breath, then they might have a point. But actually, by focusing on the breath, and particularly in the way the Buddha taught breath meditation, you learn an awful lot about the processes of fabrication going on in the mind. And these processes are important to know, both as you’re alive and when you’re dying, so that you can live and die skillfully.

After all, based on ignorance there’s fabrication. And then based on fabrication, there’s consciousness. So the consciousness that goes on to the next lifetime is shaped by fabrications. If you don’t understand these fabrications, you’ll have no control over where it’s going to go. Focusing on the breath also focuses directly on these fabrications so that, at the very least, you get some control. Or even better, you can come to understand these processes so thoroughly that, without ignorance, no consciousness is going to go on to be reborn. That’s when you’re totally free.

So focusing on the breath is not a distraction and it’s not going to leave you hanging when you have to leave the body.

Look at the Buddha’s instructions on breath meditation. Step number three: Be aware of the whole body as you breathe in and breathe out. Step number four: Calm bodily fabrication, i.e., calm the in-and-out breath. That’s one of the types of fabrication that shapes consciousness. First you have to get sensitive to it. Then you have to learn how to energize it before you can calm it. There are other places in the Canon where the Buddha says that the mind doesn’t really calm down until it’s had some rapture, a sense of energy, and feels full, refreshed, nourished. Then it can calm down. At the same time, because you’re dealing with the breath, to make it feel peaceful, comfortable, and at ease, you’re dealing with four other steps at the same time: five, six, seven, and eight.

Step five is learning how to breathe in and out sensitive to rapture; how to breathe in a way that gives you a sense of rapture. You can try an experiment: Focus on your hands. Think of all the little muscles and everything in each hand relaxing. Then keep them relaxed all the way through the in-breath, all the way

through the out-breath, and through the spaces in between. After a while, a sense of fullness will develop there in the hands. Then think of that fullness spreading up the arms, going into the torso. And whatever way of breathing that allows that to happen, that's what's meant by learning how to breathe in and out sensitive to rapture. In the beginning it may be fairly mild. But over time, it can get pretty intense.

Then, in step six, you breathe in and out sensitive to the pleasure. After the rapture's done its work, you allow things to calm down. Step seven is to breathe in and out sensitive to mental fabrication. Step eight is to calm mental fabrication. Mental fabrication covers feelings—in this case, you're focusing on the feeling of pleasure or neither pleasure nor pain—and perceptions. The perceptions are the real instigators, as Ajaan Lee would say. How you perceive the breath, how you perceive the mind, how you perceive the things that are coming in to disturb you will have a huge impact on where your mind goes: where it goes while you're meditating and also where it goes when you leave the body. So you want to be sensitive to the way the mind creates pictures to represent things to itself, and sensitive to the agreements it makes with itself, saying that this means that and that means this, or this is equivalent to that. And you want to be sensitive how these perceptions shape the state of your mind, the state of your consciousness.

As you're doing this, you're going to be engaging in verbal fabrication as well. The instructions for breath meditation themselves are verbal fabrications. They're sentences: "I'm going to breath this way. I'm going to breathe that way." And then you evaluate: "What way of breathing actually does give rise to rapture; gives rise to pleasure? What way of dealing with feelings and perceptions allows the mind to calm down?" All of these thoughts comes under the way you talk to yourself—the technical term is directed thought and evaluation.

So there you are: You're getting sensitive to all the factors that influence your consciousness now, the same ones that will influence consciousness as you leave this body and go to the next life;

In the meantime, you're getting acquainted with the breath. You've got the advantage that you've got a comfortable place to stay. You know how to nourish the body when it's tired. You know how to breathe in a way that gives you stamina when you're doing a job.

There are all sorts of useful side skills that you can develop as you focus on the breath. And all of this is meant to teach you a lot, not only about the body but even more about the mind and how it relates to the body. As the mind gets really, really still, things begin to separate out. As you begin to meditate, these fabrications are all mixed up together. But after your inner conversation has done

its work, you can put it aside. Just be with the sensation of breath. Become one with the breath. At first it'll be intense. And then things begin to calm down, calm down. Finally you get to the point where the breath stops, and yet your awareness is still there.

This is where things begin to naturally separate out. You've shed your verbal fabrications and bodily fabrications, and all you've got left are the mental fabrications: your feelings and perceptions. As with Ajaan Lee's image of the rock: You put the rock in the smelter, heat it up, and then the different metals flow out separately. Tin flows out at one temperature. Lead flows out at another. Copper flows out as the heat rises. Then silver, then gold, without your having to figure out, "Where is the gold in the rock and where is the silver in the rock? Take a little microscope and a little scalpel and try to get out the little flakes." These aren't things you can divide up in an ordinary mind state, these various fabrications. But they do separate out as you get the mind into concentration and go through the stages of stillness to the point where you've got just awareness as your main perception. This is not an awakened awareness, but it's an awareness that allows you to see: This is where the fabrications go. This is how they get started again. This is where they disappear.

You develop a sense that you can exist without all that fabrication and be perfectly fine, because otherwise you cling to it. Especially as life gets longer and longer and you get closer and closer to dying, there are all these perceptions you cling to: your memories of this person, that person, the good things they did, the bad things they did. The mind gets very clinging and very fearful.

We've talked about clinging as being like feeding. Have you ever noticed that, as animals feed, there are some that will growl at you as they're feeding, both out of fear and out of anger? Once you're trying to feed off something, you're afraid somebody's going to try to take it away. As death approaches, the same thing happens around the things you habitually cling to: There's a lot of fear at that point, because you know the body you're holding onto, the thoughts, the perceptions, the memories you're holding onto: They're going to be taken from you. Most people don't have the wisdom to say, "Well, how can I learn to live without them beforehand?" They just hang on more and more tightly.

So what you're getting here is experience in the fact that your awareness can be perfectly fine with a minimum of fabrication. If you really get down to the root of the fabrication, you can get beyond the need to be born ever again. If you don't get that far, at the very least you can be more in charge of which fabrications you're going to go with. The perceptions, the feelings, the conversation inside, the energies: Which ones are you going to follow? The more clearly you see these

things, the wider your range of choices, both now while you're sitting here perfectly fine and also when the time comes to leave the body.

So working with the breath is precisely what you need in order to be prepared for the point where you leave the body, because, as I said, you're not learning just about the breath. You're learning about all the different kinds of fabrication that shape your consciousness and that will condition where it's going to go.

So get to know these factors well. You're engaging both in tranquility and in insight at the same time. Insight is knowledge in terms of the processes of fabrication. Tranquility is getting things calm. As you get sensitive to fabrications and can calm them down—which is what you're doing in those steps of breath meditation—you've got tranquility and insight working in tandem. And when they're working in tandem, as in the Buddha's image, they deliver their message to consciousness: "This is the way out."