

## *Breath Meditation: Four Sets of Tools*

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When the Buddha teaches breath meditation, he sets it out in sixteen steps, but you don't follow the steps from one to sixteen. He divides the steps into four sets of four, called tetrads. Each tetrad deals with a different aspect of what you're going to do as you get the mind to settle down with the breath. The first tetrad deals with the body; the second with feelings of pleasure, pain, neither pleasure nor pain. The third deals with the mind, and the fourth deals with mental qualities. These are the things you're trying to bring together as you get the mind together with the breath. The steps give you some ideas of what to do, and also where to look for solutions to problems as they come up.

First the Buddha tells you simply to be aware of the breath coming in and going out, and then to focus on the body, noticing whether the breath is long or short, then trying to be aware of the whole body as you breathe in and breathe out, and then to notice the effect of the breath on the whole body. Some ways of breathing are energizing; others are relaxing. So you might ask, "What does your body need right now? Does it need a little extra energy?" Okay, breathe in long and out short. If you've had enough of that kind of breathing for a while, then let things calm down. That's a pattern in each of the tetrads. You get sensitive to what you're doing, the process that the Buddha calls fabrication, how you shape your experience right now. Then you energize it and then you try to calm it down.

Now, if you're having trouble staying with the breath, maybe the problem isn't the breath so much itself. After all it's coming in and going out all right. It's doing what it's supposed to be doing. Maybe it's with the feelings in the body. Maybe there are pains that are distracting you. In that case, the Buddha says to focus on the feelings you can create with the breath, particularly comfortable feelings: feelings of ease and pleasure, feelings of rapture or refreshment. What way of breathing would feel pleasant right now? Focus on the aspect of the breathing that induces that sense of pleasure. As for the pains, you can let them be in some other part of the body. You focus in the area where you can create the pleasure with the breath.

As for rapture, that's defined many different ways in the commentaries, but it's not defined at all in the Canon. Ajaan Lee defines it as a sense of fullness. You can do a little fullness experiment while you're breathing. Try to keep your hands as relaxed as possible. If there's any tension, tightness, or constriction anywhere in the hands, at any point in the breath cycle, just let it dissolve. After a while, there'll

be a sense of the blood filling the hand. It's not being squeezed out. Try to let that sense of fullness go up the arms. Or you can try the same with the feet. Let that sense of fullness develop in the feet. Relax all the muscles in the feet, and then think of that sense of fullness moving up the legs, up the torso as you breathe in and breathe out.

Sometimes you'll notice that as you breathe out, you tend to squeeze things in some part of the body, maybe in the hands or the feet. This time, you resist that temptation to squeeze. If the breath is going to go out, you don't have to squeeze it out. It'll go out on its own. The only effort you may have to make is in bringing it in. But let the out-breath be as effortless as possible.

Sometimes the sense of fullness gets to be too much, and this is where you move to the next step, which is getting sensitive to how these feelings have an impact on the mind. When you realize it's too much, then you try to breathe in and out in a way that calms them down. In particular, if you can focus on some subtle sensations in the body, don't focus on the intense sensations of movement in the body. Subtler sensations are what you want to focus on, and that can get you past the sense that there's pressure in the body.

You can ask yourself, "If there's a sense of pressure, what's pushing against what?" Think of the whole body being composed of atoms, and the atoms are mainly space. There's no little membrane around the atoms, and even your skin is not a solid membrane. It's got lots of gaps. All the different organs in the body have lots of little gaps in between the atoms. So wherever there's a sense of pressure, think of it not having anything to push against. It can diffuse out through those spaces.

This is where you see the role of perception in adjusting your feelings—and also its impact on the mind, because that's the third tetrad: dealing with the mind. Sometimes the problem is not the feelings in the body. It's just that the mind is either over-excited and too active in thinking about things or else too sluggish. If it's too sluggish or depressed or discouraged, what can you do to gladden it? What can you do to put yourself in a good mood? Ajaan Suwat always used to say at the beginning of each meditation, "Come to the meditation with a sense of conviction. Come with a sense of inspiration that this is really good work you're doing here. Be happy that you're meditating."

If, however, the mind is already too worked up, do what you can to calm things down. What will calm the mind down right now? Sometimes it's simply the way you breathe. Other times you have to think through the issues that are disturbing you, just to the extent of realizing they're not worth thinking about right now. You don't have to solve all your problems in life before you get the

mind to settle down. If you tried that, you'd never get to meditate at all. What you need simply is to realize that you don't need to be thinking about those things right now. That realization can help release you from those thoughts.

Whatever the problems facing you in the future, they're uncertain enough that you can't really plan in much detail what you're going to do. But you do know that when something unexpected comes up, you're going to need mindfulness, you're going to need alertness, you're going to need your powers of discernment. That's what you're developing as you meditate. So by meditating, you're not avoiding your future problems. You're actually giving yourself the skills you'll need to deal with them. That way, whatever's weighing the mind down, you can release it from it.

So these first three tetrads are basically dealing with all the component factors of getting the mind together with the breath, because what you want is a sense of the breath filling the body, a sense of comfortable feeling filling the body as much as possible, and your awareness filling the body. That's where all this is headed. You're trying to bring them all together right here. And what you need to do is to see: Where are they not fitting? Where is one thing getting in the way of something else? Then focus on the relevant tetrad to resolve the issue.

And as for the fourth tetrad, the Buddha's description is that you focus on inconstancy, then dispassion, cessation and then relinquishment. But for the time being, the only inconstancy you want to focus on is the inconstancy of the things you're thinking about that are not related to the breath. If some problem is eating away at you right now, ask yourself about problems that were eating away at the mind last year. Where are they now? They're all gone. And if you were actually able to keep a record of your worries versus the actual things that happened, you'd realize that you worried much more than the actual events warranted. The events that really knocked you off course were the ones that you had no way of knowing about beforehand.

All of this is to get a sense of dispassion for those thoughts, because it's your passion for your thinking, your interest in what the mind's going to churn up next, that keeps you feeding on these things. And as you feed on them, they feed on you. It's like the chickens from hell. You give them chicken feed in the morning, and then they come and they peck at you at night. Your passion is what's driving this process, so when you get a sense of dispassion for it, that's when it can stop. You begin to realize that all of these things that you've been feeding on are things you've been creating yourself. And the problems that you've been feeding on, you've been creating those, too. That's when you give them up,

and then they cease. And you can then relinquish both the problem and the activities you used to solve it.

So that fourth tetrad, especially in the beginning of the meditation, is to help you fend off the things that have got you distracted. It's a further explanation of that step in the third tetrad where you're supposed to release the mind. This is how you do it: You develop dispassion, that's the release. And it's a lesson you're going to be learning all the way through the meditation. As the mind moves from one level of concentration to a higher one and gets more solidly established, you find that a lot of the extra activity you've been doing to help protect it, you can drop. You release yourself from the unnecessary things you've been doing.

In the beginning, as Ajaan Fuang used to say, it's like pouring cement. You need the mold for the cement in order for the cement not to just flow away. But once the cement has hardened enough, you take the mold away, and the cement's not going to go anywhere. So with all your thinking and adjusting and evaluating: After a while you realize you've got things pretty good. The mind is here filling the body, the breath is filling the body, the sense of ease is filling the body. And all you have to do is maintain it. You've fended off the things that would get in the way. So you can drop the directed thought and evaluation. In this case, you're releasing yourself from a grosser level of concentration and getting into a more refined one.

What the Buddha's doing with these four tetrads is giving you a framework for looking at what you're doing while you're sitting right here trying to get the mind to settle down. And instead of thinking of the sixteen steps as the steps in a stairway, think of them as tools arrayed in your tool shed. They're spread out in front of you, and you pick up whatever tool you need. You don't have to pick up all sixteen, and you don't have to pick them up in any particular order. You just assess what's going wrong, and then you take the tool to deal with it. Then you put the tool down. In other words, you don't have to think about the steps as the mind begins to gather together. All you have to do is think about being right here, and then just maintain what you've got. Don't be in too great a hurry to move on to the next step. Learn to appreciate a mind that's able to settle down.

You've got these three things together: the breath filling the body, a feeling of comfort and ease filling the body, and your awareness filling the body. You're going to learn a lot of lessons about the mind as you try to maintain this state. You don't even have to think about insights so much. The insights will come as you do the work. It's like really getting to know a piece of music: You play it, you get the notes down, you work on the fingering. Then you memorize it, so you don't have to worry about the notes on the paper anymore. Then you really listen to yourself. And as you listen to yourself play, you hear a lot of things you didn't hear before.

That's what insight is like. You notice things about the mind you didn't notice before. And working at the breath is the ideal task to pursue so you can actually see the mind in action.

So once you get the mind right here, just stay right here: mindful, alert, ardent. And the things you need to know to unburden the mind will reveal themselves as you keep at this one task.