

Breathe Easy

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You sometimes hear people say that they won't be able to breathe easy until a particular problem is solved or a situation gets resolved. But how many times have you seen the problems of the world get totally solved once and for all? One problem is usually replaced by another. When that's the case, if you can't breathe easy in the midst of problems, you'll never be able to breathe easy. And that'll make the problems more and more difficult to endure.

So one of the lessons of breath meditation is that you can choose to breathe in a way that's on your side, you can make the breath your friend, you can breathe easy even in the midst of difficult situations. Even when you're sick, you can ease the breath.

A lot of this skill has to do with perception. We perceive certain parts of the body as being unresponsive to the breath, parts that the breath can't penetrate. Actually, the breath can penetrate everything. It's an energy, a very refined energy. So that's the first perception to hold in mind, that the breath is an energy that can penetrate anything, even the parts of the body that seem really solid and resistant. There's space between the atoms of those parts of the body, space within the atoms, so why isn't there room for the breath to penetrate? So think of these things opening up.

But don't put pressure on those parts. You're not trying to force the breath in there, because that makes the breath uneasy. Just think of the solid sensation as being open to being permeated, even as it is, and hold that perception in mind.

Some people don't like holding perceptions in mind like this. They say meditation should be about seeing things as they are, and here we're using our imagination. But there are so many cases in the world where if you don't use your imagination first, you won't see things as they are.

Tell a child that the Earth revolves around the Sun. The child has to use its imagination to picture that, because you look at the sky and it seems like the Sun is revolving around the Earth. But when you get a larger picture you see that, yes, that is the case. The Earth is not the center of the Universe; even the Sun is not the center of the Universe. This involves expanding your imagination.

I remember reading about Herschel, the astronomer who discovered the planet Uranus. He also discovered many, many galaxies in many stages of their development, which, as he realized, required huge expanses of time, much more vast than anybody had imagined before. Thinking about how far away those

galaxies were, he began to realize that, given that light has a speed, maybe the galaxies he saw were no longer there. They'd emitted their light many, many years ago and since been destroyed. I remember reading an interview that a younger journalist had had with the older Herschel. It really blew the journalist's mind: Here was this old man with ideas that the young journalist had never conceived.

So using your imagination doesn't mean that you're just making things up. It means you're expanding your sense of what's possible. And here's a particularly useful way of expanding your sense of what's possible: You can have the breath on your side, you can breathe easy in the midst of difficult situations and those situations will become a lot easier to endure. You can stick with difficulties for a much longer time.

This is especially important now, as the pandemic seems to be going on and on and on. I was talking today with someone who was saying she had expected it to be just one wave and then go away. Now it's proving to be a lot longer than she'd expected. Thinking out ahead about how long it might take for the pandemic to go away just weighed her down. I said, "That's precisely the problem, you're weighing yourself down with thoughts about things you don't even know."

Even if the pandemic goes away, that doesn't mean it's the end of disease, the end of illness, the end of death. These things keep happening. Even before the pandemic started, I was told that on average more than 200,000 people die every day. So aging, illness, and death aren't going to go away anytime soon.

The inconveniences of the pandemic will be replaced by other inconveniences. So in the midst of all these inconveniences, these difficulties, these challenges, we have to learn how to breathe easy.

So use your imagination to help the breath become easy. And think of new ways that the breath comes into the body. You can think of the breath as coming in through not only the nose, but also through the eyes, the ears. You can think of the breath energy originating *inside* the body first so that the body can pull in the air that we associate with the breath. And remember, it's the energy in the body that's most important anyhow. Air on its own doesn't do anything. It's the movement of the energy in the body that gets the air to come in. And you can perceive that movement as starting anywhere.

I had a student who had Marfan Syndrome, a connective tissue disorder. She'd studied to be a nurse and made it her specialty to help other people with the same syndrome. At her funeral, I met a young man who also had Marfan. He told me that when he was thirteen he had to have a heart operation, and after the operation the doctors had given him painkillers, but the pain wouldn't go away. She came to visit him in the hospital, listened to his problems, and then told him,

“Breathe through your butt!” He looked a little embarrassed, but said that it actually worked in alleviating the pain, that when he could conceive of the breath energy starting at that point in the body, it changed the dynamic inside. What wasn’t possible before now became possible.

So learn to use your imagination to see what way of breathing will be easy, what way of breathing will make it easier to endure long periods of difficulty. As I said, one difficulty ends and another difficulty will come. This is just the nature of life. We go from one challenge to another. So instead of waiting until the challenges are over, we learn how to breathe easy in their midst.

After all, as you get older, it’s not the case that the challenges will go away, or even that people will be nicer and more respectful to you as you get older. While practicing my French, I was reading a lot of biographies in French of famous French people. One thing that struck me was that oftentimes as these people got older and their position of power began to falter a little bit, younger people gathered in for the attack. Instead of having a nice, easy old age, they found that they had to fight even harder. And that was just things outside. On top of that, of course, there were the diseases that became more and more numerous and serious as they got older.

This is the nature of human life: *Things don’t get easier*. So while you have the energy and the power of imagination, learn how to use that imagination to perceive the body, to perceive the breath in ways that the breath can be easy. When the breath is easy, you’ve got an inner sense of well-being, and that well-being becomes your strength. So regardless of what’s happening outside, you’re not adding unnecessary burdens to yourself by breathing in ways that are difficult, constrained. This is one area of your awareness where you can exert some control, so make the most of it.

Think of the in-breath coming in easily, stopping easily, going back out easily, stopping easily. The in-breath and the out-breath flow into each other. Don’t squeeze things. Allow the body to have a sense of well-being. That way, the mind is less burdened, and it’s more able to deal with whatever the outside difficulties or inside difficulties are, because it has this constant source of food coming from the breath.

Ajaan Fuang would comment on this often, on how the ability to breathe easy is a source of nourishment. You can have all the physical food you might want, and the body can still feel starved if the breath is starved. There’s no one forcing us to breathe in a way that’s difficult. There’s no breath police. They haven’t privatized the breath. It’s all yours.

So try to realize the full implications of that, expand your sense of the possibilities of what the breath can do, and it'll be your friend as long as you're together.