

## *Imagine Your Breath*

*August 8, 2020*

Keep focused on the breath, in and of itself—ardent, alert, mindful—putting aside greed and distress with reference to the world. That's the formula. What it means is that you put aside all your concerns about the world right now. You can think of the world as anything from starting from the skin around your body on out, except for the cocoon of breath energy you may have around the body. In other words, you want to be with the breath as it is, right here, right now. Try not to let anything else interfere.

Remember that. That's what it means to be mindful. Be alert to what you're doing, and be ardent in doing it well. Give yourself totally to the breath right now. Because no matter how much the world needs to be straightened out, there's a lot that needs to be straightened out inside. It's amazing not only how people in general resist that, but even people who claim to be Buddhists. But that's their business. Our business is what we're doing right now, right here, learning to be comfortable in our own skins—because if we can't be comfortable here, we're not going to find any comfort outside.

This is one of the reasons why we work with the breath, because the breath is the element or the property of the body that's most amenable to our adjusting. In fact, one of the most important skills in working with the breath is the adjusting.

Ajaan Lee tells the story of an old monk who'd been doing breath meditation 40 years, ever since the time of Ajaan Mun, and he said that he didn't see it go anywhere. Ajaan Lee's analysis of the problem was that the monk hadn't worked with the breath at all. He just let it go in out, in out, in out. He didn't stop to think that there are lots of different ways the breath can come in, lots of different ways it can go out, lots of different ways it can circulate around the body.

So how do you adjust the breath? For one thing, you don't put a lot of pressure on it. It's so often the case that when you encounter a blockage in the body, the problem is not that something is blocking you. The problem is that you're pushing against what you perceive as solid. Think of the breath as being diffuse. It can go through things and around things. It can go in any direction. So if you feel a sense of blockage, think of the breath going around it or penetrating it. The picture you hold in mind of the breath plays a huge role in this.

This means that when you're adjusting the breath, you're also adjusting your perceptions. It's good to keep in mind an image that the body as a whole is as diffuse as possible. Otherwise, you find yourself tensing up here, tensing up there,

to have a sensation that corresponds to where you think the different parts of the body should be. But that doesn't help anything. Think of things being more diffuse

And then notice as you breathe in: What direction does the breath go in the body? Are you pulling it up? What does that do? Is it settling down too much? What does that do? There are times when you have to think of it going up for a while, or there are times when you have to think of it going down for a while, to bring things into balance.

Also, when you have a sensation of blockage, is it really in the spot where the mind tells you it is? One thing I've found helpful is to ask yourself, if the mind says that this particular knot of tension is in the front: What if it's actually an extension of a knot of tension that's in the back? Hold that perception in mind for a while, and see what it does.

And then try vice versa. If there's something the mind says is in the back, focus on perceiving that particular knot of tension as in the front. That might help it dissolve. Because remember, when the Buddha describes breath meditation, it's an opportunity to learn about fabrication: bodily, verbal, mental. We're here not only to see how the breath goes, but also how you talk to yourself, how perceptions and feelings get involved, and how you can play around with them. You'll find that an important part of it is learning how to talk yourself. Ajaan Lee singles this out—verbal fabrication—as the big culprit among the different kinds of fabrication. The kind of conversations you tend to hold in the mind get carried over into your engagement with the breath.

If you tend to talk to yourself in unskillful ways, you'll be talking to yourself about the breath in unskillful ways. So try to pick up some good habits in how you talk to yourself. Remind yourself that the breath is your friend. It's the force of life. It's kept you going this long. You don't know how much longer it's going to keep the body going, but you've got it right now. And you can play with it. You can use it as an example for how to test your perceptions. Sometimes the effects will be quicker than you might imagine.

So you ask yourself, what if the breath goes up?—and the breath will start going up. What if it goes down?—and it starts going down. If you're not sure of your perceptions, you can drop them. The trick then is to learn how to just hold on to the perception—without pushing the breath—to see how far you can carry through with it, and to see if it has a good effect on the breath. If it doesn't, you can change.

This of course requires some imagination. Ajaan Lee gives us some pointers: You notice as you look through his different instructions on breath meditation,

he's got the guides there in Method One and Method Two. But when you look through his Dhamma talks, you'll see that he's got other ways of playing with the breath that he doesn't mention in the guides. You wonder how many other ways he would have found with playing with the breath if he had lived longer.

Meanwhile, though, you're here, you're alive, you can play. You can think of the breath energy coming into the body from all directions, all at once. Ajaan Fuang one time recommended a perception where you have a cord of energy running down through the middle of the torso. As you breathe in, the breath comes into that cord from all directions, and it goes out from that cord in all directions. You just hold that perception in mind. You don't have to do anything to force the breath that way. Just hold the perception in mind, and it will change the way you feel the breath.

He would also talk about the breath in the bones.

One of his students was commenting one time on how he was on a bus ride. He'd had trouble getting to stay with the breath up to that point, but for some reason that day everything seemed to click. As he later told Ajaan Fuang, the breath became delicious. So from that point on every time Ajaan Fuang taught him meditation, he would say, "Okay, get so your breath is delicious again." What would *your* delicious breath be like? What would taste really good, what would sound really good, what would smell really good, in terms of the breathing? Try to expand your repertoire of new ways of thinking about the breath.

Some of the experiments may not work, but you never know until you try. So as you're meditating, if you find yourself getting stuck in old ruts—dealing with the breath in the same old ways and getting the same old results—remind yourself that you can change. You can improve your relationship with the breath by allowing yourself to imagine it.

I know some people who object to using imagination in meditation. They say, "Aren't we here just to see reality as it is?" Yes, and one of the features of reality as it is, is that your imagination plays a huge role in shaping it. To the extent your imagination can close things off, it can also open things up.

It's like the programs they had analyzing the data that satellites were sending back, showing that there was a huge ozone hole over Antarctica. The programs had been written in such a way that if data like that came in, it was automatically rejected. So for years, they were getting the data, but it was being thrown out because the programmers didn't have it in their imagination that there could be such a thing as an ozone hole.

Sometimes it's through your imagination that you get to reality. After all, we have to imagine that the world is round. We haven't seen that it's round. We've

seen pictures, but who knows if those pictures are true? But people have found that by imagining that the world was round, they could shorten the distance flying, say, from Los Angeles to Paris. If the world were flat, you'd have to go one way. If the world is round, you can go further north and save a lot of time. And that's what you can actually do, which makes sense only if the world really is round.

So try to expand your imagination about what the breath can do and how you can relate to the breath: what an in-breath should feel like, what an out-breath should feel like. You begin to realize that what Ajaan Lee had to say about evaluation, the adjusting of the breath, is really true: It's the discernment faculty in your concentration. You begin to see fabrication. You begin to see how it can be used to energize the body, to calm the body, to energize the mind, to calm the mind. You come to realize that you've got a lot more leeway here in the present moment for making this a much better place to be.

So allow yourself to imagine that things can go well inside the body. And see what that act of imagination can open up.