

When You've Played Enough With the Breath

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When the Buddha teaches the sixteen steps of breath meditation, he divides them into four sets of four, called tetrads. The first tetrad deals with the breath directly; the second, with feelings; the third, with the mind; and the fourth, with dhammas. These correspond to the four frames of reference for establishing mindfulness.

The theme all the way through these steps is the interaction among breath, feelings, and mind. In some of the steps, the emphasis is on how the mind can have an impact on the breath and how it can shape feelings; in others, it's how feelings and the breath can have an impact on the mind.

The last two steps in the second tetrad tell you to be sensitive to mental fabrication and try to calm mental fabrication: You're breathing in such a way—you're using feelings and perceptions in such a way—to calm the mind down.

In the third tetrad, you're focusing directly on what kind of states you want the mind to have. The steps are these: In the first one you breathe in and out sensitive to the mind, in the second one you breathe in and out gladdening the mind, in the third you breathe in and out concentrating the mind, and in the fourth you breathe in and out releasing the mind.

Now, it's not the case that you do this only after having dealt thoroughly with the breath or having dealt thoroughly with feelings. After all, as you're meditating, the mind is right there all the time, giving the orders from the very beginning and being developed from the very beginning.

You want to make sure it's being developed in the right way, so you focus on the different tetrads depending on what the problem is. If the mind has trouble settling down, is it because of the breath? Is it because of feelings? Or is there a problem with the mind itself?

While you're focusing on the breath, you've got feelings right here, the mind right here, and you want to keep an eye on all three. This third tetrad gives you some ideas of what general direction you should try to take the mind.

There are two ways of reading the steps in the third tetrad. One is that, as you're sensitive to the mind, sometimes you see that it needs to be gladdened—it's depressed, or it's sleepy and it needs energizing—so you try to breathe in a way that energizes it. This is where you use directed thought and evaluation to work with the breath energies in the body, or to bring up another topic that gladdens the mind. You can think about your virtue; you can think about your generosity.

After all, an important part of the meditation is that you're providing the mind with an alternative to sensual pleasure. As the Buddha says, we go for the pleasures of sensuality because we think they're the only alternative we have for pain. So here we want to make sure that the mind realizes that there is this other, better alternative. If the mind needs to be gladdened, if it needs to be energized, okay: Breathe in a way, think in a way, that gives it more energy.

If, on the other hand, it's already too frenetic, already too wired, then you want to breathe in a way that steadies it, think in a way that steadies it. Here, thoughts about death may help: realizing that you don't have much time. Even if you live to be 100 years, it's not that you've been gathering more and more time as you've aged. When the 100 years are up, there's no time. It's all gone. Or as the Thais say, time eats up living beings as it eats up itself. It's not the case that, as time passes, you just get more and more and more time to wander around in, because your memories of the past are very unreliable. Especially as you get older, they get more and more unreliable. Time closes in on you.

So, are you ready to go? If your mind has been wandering around, this thought is bracing: It makes you stop and realize you've got work to do right here, right now, so you've got to get focused right here.

Finally, if you see the mind needs to be released from certain burdens, learn how to think in ways, breathe in certain ways, that release it.

That way of reading the four steps in this tetrad is basically as a set of alternatives. Once you're sensitive to the state of mind, that it's out of balance in one direction or another, you work with it in a way—you work with the breath in a way, you work with feelings in a way—that will bring things back into balance, to help the mind let go of its burdens.

Another way of reading those steps is in a consecutive order. First get sensitive to where your mind is right now. Then the next step is to gladden it. Here again: directed thought and evaluation. The Buddha talks about gladdening the mind through the practice of generosity, through the practice of virtue, but you can use your directed thought and evaluation to have a lot of fun with the breath, to play around with the breath as well.

Just as generosity provides you with lots of opportunities for exercising your ingenuity in the world outside—practicing the Dhamma in a way that gives rein to your ingenuity—directed thought and evaluation with the breath allow you to be as ingenious as you can, as ingenious as you want to be right here and now.

It can be with the breath energies, to bring balance to the body. If things are out of order in the body, if there's a particular illness in the body, this is the time to use your directed thought and evaluation. Work with the breath energies.

Think of the breath coming in and out in ways that you hadn't thought of before: coming in through the back, coming down from the head, coming up through the soles of the feet, moving around in various layers. There are all kinds of ways that you can think of playing with the breath.

But you have to realize: This is good up to a point. As you read in the stages of jhana, you start out with directed thought and evaluation, and then you have to let them go.

That third step in the tetrad, concentrating the mind, can be read as corresponding to the higher jhanas, beginning with the second, when you give rise to a sense of pleasure and rapture that doesn't come through thinking about good Dhamma topics that are secluded from sensuality. This is a pleasure and rapture based on concentration. You're focused.

You stop talking to yourself about the breath, aside from just the mental note, "breath," if you've been using an image or a word. But all the sentences, all the ingenuity, all the inner chatter can be allowed to fall silent. They have to be allowed to fall silent if you really want to see subtler things in the mind.

If you're constantly talking to yourself, it's like sitting in a room hoping to hear the sound of the mice in the walls—so that you can catch the mice—but you're talking to yourself all the time. The sound of your voice is going to obscure a lot of the things you otherwise would hear.

So it's good to have a sense of enough with the directed thought and evaluation. Tell yourself, "Okay, that's enough entertainment for right now, enough time spent treating the body right now." You have to give the mind some time to just be on its own, so that it can watch itself clearly. And it does this best if it's really, really still.

It's like looking at your reflection in water. If there are waves in the water—even if they're pretty waves—they get in the way of seeing your reflection clearly. You want the water to be perfectly still, the surface to be perfectly flat.

Think of Ajaan Lee's image: It's like looking into a mirror. If the mirror's convex or concave, your reflection will be abnormally short or abnormally tall. You want the mirror to be flat.

So when the breath energies are good enough to settle down with, allow them to be good enough. We're not here looking for the perfect breath, or the most imaginative breath. We use our imaginations to help things settle down, but then we've *got* to settle down at some point and allow the mind to show itself.

Only when the mind can show itself, when you're really, really still with it: That's when you can release it. The Buddha talks about releasing it as it goes through the different levels of jhana. You release it from directed thought and

evaluation, then you release it from rapture, then you release it from pleasure. You want to get the mind perfectly still. Again, think of a flat mirror that's perfectly reflective.

You may ask yourself, "What's going to happen there?" Well, you watch. There will be some unexpected things. When you're doing your directed thought and evaluation, you're the one in charge of what's going to happen. But when you allow the mind to be really quiet, then you allow it to see what's happening in an unexpected way.

After all, we're looking for insights that are unexpected. If insight were something that you could expect, then it would be something you already knew ahead of time. We're looking for the things that you haven't known ahead of time, things you haven't understood yet, things you haven't noticed yet. As the Buddha said, we're looking for the as-yet-unattained, and as-yet-unrealized, as-yet-unknown.

For that, you have to be really quiet, with an awareness that's all-around. Then, when you catch something that's holding the mind down, you don't have to tell it to let go. It realizes: This is unnecessary. You can let it go.

So that's the linear way of looking at these steps.

These two ways of looking at the steps correspond to the Buddha's two ways of explaining the seven factors for awakening. In some cases, he says that you start out mindful and alert, and then you notice what the mind needs. If it needs to be energized, you focus on the factors that are energizing: analysis of qualities, persistence, rapture. If it needs to be calmed down, you focus on the more calming factors: calm, concentration, equanimity.

In other cases, though, he treats the factors for awakening in a linear way. You start out mindful and alert and then you go straight for the analysis of qualities—analyzing what's skillful and unskillful in your mind—and then make an effort to give rise to what's skillful in a way that gives rise to rapture. That would involve directed thought and evaluation.

From there you calm things down through calm, concentration, and equanimity. Once the directed thought and evaluation have done their work, you've got to put them aside so that the mind can be really still. You allow yourself some Dhamma entertainment to begin with—to lift your spirits, to pull you away from your fascination with sensual pleasures. But then you've got to pull yourself away from your fascination with all the fun you can have with the breath, all the fun you can have with your thinking, so that you can begin to see things that are happening on their own—and so that you can learn unexpected lessons. Because

the unexpected insights are the ones that have the biggest impact, and make the most difference.