

## *All Four Tetrads at Once*

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When we read the suttas, we should remember that they were never meant to be read on their own. They were part of a community—the inherited knowledge of the community. In the early days, you would hear a sutta and then you could ask the person reciting it, “What does this mean? What does that mean?” He could fill in the blanks, because often there are quite a few blanks.

You see this especially in the Buddha’s instructions on breath meditation. They’re his most complete set of meditation instructions and yet they leave a lot of questions unanswered. So we have to look around: Read some passages in the context of other suttas, try to make sense out of them, and talk them over with people who have practiced, to gain a sense of what the passages might be getting at.

The first big question is: Are the sixteen steps meant to be read and practiced in line, in other words—one through sixteen? And the indication seems to be: no.

They fall into four sets of four, called tetrads. The first tetrad has to do directly with the breath. The second tetrad has to do with feelings; the third with the mind; and the fourth with dhammas. It’s not the case that you’re going to focus on the body and only when the body is all taken care of will you focus on feelings, and then wait until when the feelings are all taken care of to focus on the mind and then the dhammas. Actually, they’re all going to be present right from the start.

And the sutta itself, where the Buddha gives the most detailed explanation of these steps, indicates as much. It says that when you pay attention to the breath, the act of paying attention generates a feeling—or *is* a feeling, the text says—but basically the act of attention helps to fabricate a feeling, what’s called a feeling not-of-the-flesh. As for the mind, there’s no mindfulness of breathing without mindfulness and alertness. And as for dhammas, you have to develop a quality of equanimity to put aside all your other concerns right from the beginning. So even as you’re first settling in with the breath, you’ve got all four aspects right there.

You can read the different tetrads as alternative instructions as to what to do. First you analyze the problem: You’re trying to settle down and the mind’s not settling down. Is it a problem with the breath? Is it a problem with the feelings, the mind, or outside things coming in? Once you’ve identified the problem, then you can look at the appropriate tetrad to see what it is you might be doing wrong and what you can change.

For example, with the first tetrad: The first two steps are to breathe in long and out long, breathe in short and out short. The next two steps are trainings. You train yourself to be aware of the whole body as you breathe in and out, and then you train yourself to breathe in and out calming bodily fabrication—in other words, the intentional element of the breath, or the in-and-out breath itself. This last step can take you all the way to the fourth jhana. Another sutta says that when the bodily fabrication is fully calmed, that's where you're going to be: fourth jhana.

That's a very brief outline in how you deal with the breath. Actually, though, there's a lot more that goes on. Ajaan Lee would fill in quite a few of the details. When the Buddha says to be aware of long breathing and short breathing, you can expand that. You can include deep or shallow, heavy or light, fast or slow. And because you know from the second tetrad that you're going to be trying to develop a sense of fullness or refreshment and pleasure with the breath, you can use the variations of the breath to help induce that sense of pleasure.

Then you're aware of the whole body as you breathe in. You train yourself at this point. This is something you have to get good at. A lot of people have trouble with this. They're focused on one spot, then they try to be aware of the whole body, and very quickly find themselves back at one spot again. It takes a while to back into the sense of awareness that's filling the body all the time. You've got your spotlight awareness and you've got your background awareness. What you're trying to do is bring your background awareness up to the fore.

As for calming bodily fabrication, we learn elsewhere that before you calm things down, you should energize them. Otherwise, you can put yourself to sleep. So first breathe in a way that's energizing and then allow things to relax. As your focus gets better, you can stay with calmer breathing and not lose focus. If you find, though, that the breath gets so gentle that you can't keep track of it, you have to breathe a little bit more heavily again. That's the breath side of things.

Then there's the feeling side. You breathe in and out training yourself to be sensitive to rapture. In other words, there are potentials for rapture or refreshment in the body. Wherever in the body there's a sense of fullness, allow that sense of fullness to stay. This can just be the sense that it's full of blood or full of energy. There's a nice buzz, say, in your hands, or in the middle of the chest. Allow that nice feeling to be unaffected by the in-and-out breathing so that it gets the chance to grow stronger. As it grows stronger, then you can let it spread. It's usually accompanied by pleasure. Sometimes, though, they're two different things. After a while, the sense of refreshment or energy spreading gets to be a little bit

too much. So you figure out how to tune in to a more subtle level of energy that's just pleasant and you let the excess go.

The next step is to be sensitive to mental fabrications, which are feelings and perceptions. And the step after that is to calm mental fabrications. This is where you find the perceptions come in to play a big role. You're trying to find perceptions that will create calmer feelings, because you're going to go from rapture down to pleasure and then ultimately to equanimity. What kind of perceptions help? Ajaan Lee recommends perceiving the whole body as saturated with breath energy flowing in different parts of the body. In some cases it flows up; in some cases it flows down or circles around. So what way of perceiving the breathing would be most helpful to get things to calm down? Because when mental fabrication is totally calm, that can take you all the way through the formless jhanas.

Here again we see how the different tetrads are not lined up in a row. The first tetrad delivers you to the fourth jhana but then the second tetrad starts way back with the first jhana, trying to develop a sense of rapture, before taking you up to the fourth jhana and into the formless ones.

The third tetrad follows a similar principle. It starts with being sensitive to the mind. If you haven't been sensitive to the mind up to this point, you're not going to get anywhere. As the Buddha said, the mind is right there: It has to be mindful and alert for you to stay with the breath from the very beginning. But sometimes the mind is the problem. So you look at it. You get sensitive to the state of the mind, and then you notice: Does it need to be gladdened and energized? Okay, breathe in a way that gives it more energy. Breathe in a way that gives it a greater sense of rapture and well-being. Sometimes to gladden the mind you have to drop the breath and go to another theme that you find inspiring.

Does the mind need to be concentrated? Do what you can to get things really focused. Does it need to be released from its burdens? These are the different steps you follow in the third tetrad. In other words, you read your mind and then you energize it, then you steady it and concentrate it, and then you release it. Those steps do follow in a logical order, but sometimes you have to jump around a little bit. You might have to steady things before you energized them.

So this tetrad, too, starts at the very beginning and delivers you up through the jhanas through the various levels of release. The release here, as we were saying this afternoon, could be awareness-release: in other words, the simple release of letting go of sensuality or sensual thoughts for the time being; letting go of any other unskillful qualities for the time being; or letting go of the factors of a lower state of concentration as you're trying to get into a higher one. It can also, though,

mean total release. Because that's what you want with the mind. You want bodily fabrication to be calmed. You want mental fabrication to be calmed. But you want the mind to be released.

The fourth tetrad gives you some idea how to do that. First you start with inconstancy. You notice how things arise and pass away. In the Buddha's descriptions of arising and passing away, he always says that your knowledge has to be penetrative. In other words, you don't just see things coming and going, you want to see *why* they come, *why* they go. And when they come, are they good? Are they the kind of things you want to encourage or not? That's what it means for knowledge to be penetrative.

In the very beginning, the main focus is on the inconstancy of the things that are distracting you. The Buddha himself relates this particular tetrad to the task of putting aside greed and distress with reference to the world. And in his instructions to Rahula, when he taught Rahula breath meditation, even before he started with the first step, he had him contemplate various themes, one of which was inconstancy. This is where you use it.

Suppose you suddenly think of something that happened years back. You have to remind yourself: That's gone. Or if you think of something you're anticipating in the future, you remind yourself that even if it comes, it's going to go, too. We've been searching for happiness in things that change, change, change all the time. Isn't it time to look for something more reliable? In this way, you develop a sense of dispassion for the distraction. And it stops. When it stops, you put everything down. In other words, you don't have to keep thinking about how great it was that you were able to put that down. You put it down and then you get back to work. So those are the steps: Focus on inconstancy, then on dispassion, then on cessation, then on letting go.

As the concentration gets deeper, again, you're going from one level of concentration to another, you want to see the factors that you're dropping as inconstant, not worthy of passion, so that you can put them down. Then when the concentration is solid, you begin to notice that even it has its inconstancy. There are risings and fallings in the level of stress. So you look into them. What's causing them? Why does the stress go up? Why does it go down? You see what's causing it to go up and you realize you don't need that. You develop dispassion for that. Because your passion was driving it, dispassion makes it stop. Then you put everything down, including the insights that made things stop. This is the kind of analysis that ultimately can set you free.

So the four tetrads are not to be lined up in a row, one after the other. They're to be lined up side by side. They're like a map with four pages. You unfold it and

there are four sections. And it's good to have the map—in the back of your mind. Don't put it in the front of your mind while you're meditating. That would be like trying to go through a forest looking at nothing but the map as you follow along the trail. You're going to run into trees, you're going to run into stumps, you're going to get bitten by a snake. Ideally, you first look at the map to get a sense of the general direction. Then you put it down and focus on the trail itself. In other words, you have the map of breath meditation in the back of your mind but you've got the breath to the forefront. And you realize there are feelings right here, there are mind states right here, there are dhammas right here. You're trying to get them together in a way that's calm and clear.

So use this map to figure out what's lacking, what needs to be added. This presence of mind with the breath right here: That's what it's all about. The map is there to give you an idea of how many facets there are to what you're doing right here, right now, because that's an important part of meditation. You do the meditation but you also reflect on what you're doing. You realize that you're not here just to be with the object, but you're also here to look at the mind as it relates to the object—because that's even more fascinating than the object. The breath does have lots of details, especially in the workings of breath energy in the body. But the way the mind relates to objects is even more fascinating. The way it falls for its feelings and perceptions is even more interesting. The way it relates to itself is interesting. You want to be aware of all these facets, because only then does your vision become all-round.

We're students of the Buddha, who was said to have an all-around eye. He saw things from all angles, reflected on things from all sides. That was what enabled him to find a release that was total: release all-around. As he said, his mind was released everywhere. That's our teacher. So if we try to follow him, see if we can make our own awareness all-around, too.