

First Principles

November 9, 2021

When Ajaan Fuang taught meditation on the elements, he'd start with the breath. He wouldn't have you go to any of the other elements until you'd really mastered the breath. This is a principle you find throughout the forest tradition. If you want to know the aggregates, focus on one of them. Really get to know it. That knowledge will then spread to the others.

The same with the elements: Really get to know the breath element—how it responds to your mind, how it responds to your perceptions, how it responds to your directed thought and evaluation. You learn some important lessons in that principle the Buddha put at the very beginning of the Dhammapada. *Mano-pubbangama dhamma*: All phenomena have the mind as their forerunner.

We tend to regard the elements in the body or the material side of the body as something that's already there, and then the mind moves in afterwards, deals with it afterwards. But if you learn to be more consciously proactive in how you approach your body, you begin to realize that the mind has already been playing a huge role in shaping your experience all along. How you perceive the breath has a huge impact on how the breath actually feels. In other words, the images you hold in mind determine how the breath flows.

This is why it's really useful to have Ajaan Lee's instructions on how to think about the breath. First you examine the different ways of breathing: in short out short, in long out long, in short out long, in long out short. Try to get sensitive to where you feel the breathing in the body.

Then he would bring in different perceptions. Think of the breath coming in the back of the neck. That's a very counter-intuitive place, but for those of us who have heart disease find that that's a really useful place to start, because a lot of tension tends to build up there.

So think of the breath coming in from the back. This is to counteract the perception we already have about the breath coming in from the front. If you feel you have to pull it in from the front, you can create a lot of unnecessary tension. Now you allow it to come in from the back. That reverses the tension. Cancels it out. Then think of the breath coming in there and going down the spine. Then think about it going out the legs, and then starting at the neck, going down the shoulders and the arms, out to the tips of the fingers. In the front of the body, think of the breath coming in right at the heart in the middle of the chest, then going down through the stomach and intestines. And those are just the beginning.

As you read Ajaan Lee's other Dhamma talks, you see how he had lots of other ways of perceiving the breath, too. Ajaan Fuang had his own. I once tried to get him to write a book on breath meditation, because he had lots of different ways of thinking about the breath that I hadn't heard of before: the breath in the bones. The breath going in and out the eyes. The breath going out the base of the spine and into the ground. Problems with the breath could be solved by thinking in those ways. As he once said, when you start working on the breath, you'll run into problems, but they can all be solved. Except for one problem, which is if you don't do the practice.

So have that confidence: Whatever comes up, such as an imbalance in the energy, there's a way of dealing with it. If you feel like it's oppressive in the middle of the chest, think of the sense of breath there going out along the arms and out through the palms of the hands. If the breath energy seems to be collecting up in the top of the head, think of it going down the spine and out into the ground from the tailbone.

Now, as you do this, you begin to realize that your perception of the breath has a huge impact on how it goes. This is how breath counts as an element in the body. The nature of the elements in the Pali Canon—the word is *dhātu*—is that they can be provoked. In other words, they lie latent, but then you can provoke them to act in various ways. Outside, you have the external elements. There's a theory about how the wind element gets provoked and causes windstorms. The water element gets provoked and causes floods. The fire element, of course, could cause huge fires when it's provoked. But then they can go still. When the provocation stops, they go back to their latent state.

With the elements in the body, their provocation can come from outside, but it can also come from your perceptions, your thoughts. One of the reasons why we work with the breath first is because it's the most sensitive to what's going on in the mind. One thing you have to watch out for is to make sure that you don't confuse breath energy with water energy in the body, because of course the blood and the lymph move through the body, too, down the same channels as the breath. The difference is as the blood moves, it stops when it runs up against something solid, and pressure can build up. Whereas the breath can go right through.

Think of how your atoms are mainly space. Someone give me a book recently on different space scales in the cosmos. Each page would magnify things a thousand times from the previous page, and between seeing the atom and then finally getting to the nucleus of the atom, there are many, many pages of nothing, nothing, nothing. The nucleus is that small in relation to the rest of the atom. All

around it is full of space. So the breath can easily flow through there. Hold that perception in mind. It helps get rid of a lot of the sense of blockage that comes from pushing the fluids in the body around too much, and not enough of the breath.

So there are ways you can create discomfort through different perceptions, but then you change the perceptions. Make sure to resist the tendency to push things physically. Let the perceptions do the work. Then you find that you can solve those problems. In this way, you really get to know the breath well.

It's when you know one thing well that you can then transfer that expertise over to other things. If you try to know too many things all at once, nothing gets really known. We deal with concepts, ideas. And in terms of the books, it may be correct. But the whole point of the Dhamma and the books is what the Buddha calls *attha*, which is the benefit that you get from that Dhamma.

Think of that time when the Buddha was in a simsapa forest. He picked up a handful of simsapa leaves and asked the monks, "Which is greater, the number of leaves in the forest, or the leaves in my hand?" "Of course," they said, "the leaves in the forest are much greater." The Buddha then said, in the same way, what he had learned through his awakening through his direct knowledge was like the leaves in the forest, but what he taught was like the leaves in his hand. He taught just a little bit. The reason he hadn't taught the rest was because it wouldn't lead to unbinding. But the leaves in his hand, which represented the four noble truths, *did* lead to unbinding.

So the Dhamma has its purpose. And to really know what the Dhamma means, you have to know its purpose and experience the benefit that you get from putting it into practice. That's when you really know. Prior to that time, it's all just concepts. And although it's useful to have the outlines of right view nailed down, still it's possible to have too much book learning about things. The book learning is useful when you can figure out how the concepts apply to this experience right here: you, the breath, the awareness, the body. Trying to get them all together. Looking for the potentials you have right here. Because there is a potential for ease and well-being in the breath. There is a potential for rapture, refreshment, fullness in the breath. This breath you're breathing, right here, right now. If it's not pleasurable, where's the potential for pleasure here? If you're not sure, back up and just watch for a while. Let the breath do its own thing. And then you feel your way.

That's how knowledge comes. But it really is your knowledge, not just somebody else's words stamped across your brain. You have the right vocabulary for it, but there's also an aspect to it that's more intuitional, more direct. You

know, without having verbalized, what's working, what's not working. You can feel it.

There's another aspect to Ajaan Fuang's teachings. Even though the books that he handed out—Ajaan Lee's *Keeping the Breath in Mind*—had instructions on jhana, he never talked to his students about getting into jhana. Never certified who had which jhana. When people would come and ask him questions about their meditation, he would say, "Well, how does it feel to you?" In other words, don't look at the words in the book. Look at how your feelings are responding to what you're doing. Learn how to read those feelings, finding out which feelings are actually telling you something important, which feelings are getting in the way: noise in the system. You have to learn how to read that.

And in areas like that, the best a teacher can do is say, "This is what you have to look for. Ask these questions." Then you have to figure things out from there. But in figuring things out, that's how you develop your discernment. Again, it's not somebody else's concepts pasted across your experience. It's your sense of what works, what doesn't work; which actions are worth doing, which ones are not worth doing. And when you are tempted to do something unskillful, how can you talk yourself out of it? When you're too lazy to do something skillful, how can you talk yourself into being not lazy? That's real discernment—and that has to come from you.

So we're looking at the potentials of the breath at the same time we're looking at the mind's potentials for discernment, learning how to activate them.

And the experience that will result comes from within here, too. Nobody's going to come in and give you their Buddha nature. The potential for awakening lies right here within you already.

An image from the forest tradition is wood that hasn't been polished. It has a grain, but the grain doesn't stand out. All you can do is polish it. You don't have to add anything new or draw any new grain. Just polish it, and the grain will begin to stand out and be clear.