

Breathing to Awakening

November 19, 2021

In Asia, this is the last full moon of the rainy season, and it marks two events, at least here at the monastery. One is that it's a day in celebration of nagas—the nagas who are reported to protect the religion. Ajaan Lee would have a ceremony every year at this date, preparing naga food and thinking of the nagas, showing appreciation for the protection they've given us.

It's also the night on which the Buddha delivered the *Ānāpānasati Sutta*, setting out the sixteen steps of breath meditation and showing their relationship to the four establishings of mindfulness, the seven factors for awakening, and clear knowing and release. The best way to celebrate that event is to practice breath meditation, as we're doing right now.

But the two events connect at the seven factors for awakening, because the nagas are supposed to have seven heads, and the seven heads represent the seven factors for awakening.

So, how are those factors related to the breath? It depends on how you approach the breath. To begin with, you're mindful of the breath—you keep it in mind that this is where you want to stay. You're also mindful of all the things you've learned about dealing with the breath, and you try to bring them to bear on what you're doing. This allows you to recognize, when thoughts come up: If it's a thought related to the breath, you want to encourage it; if it's one that's not related to the breath, you want to let it go.

As for thoughts that are related to the breath, that's where you come into the second factor for awakening, which is analysis of qualities. You want the breath to engage your imagination. It's not a dry analysis—"Well, this is good and that's bad." You also want to think about how the breath has an impact on your health: the health of the body, the health of the mind.

It's your direct experience of the body. In fact, it's so direct that we tend to overlook it. Ajaan Fuang called it "the grass at the gate of the corral": The cows are kept in the corral and, when the gate is open, they go running out to find grass out in the meadow, while they neglect to see that there's grass right there at the post next to the gate. The breath is so close that we don't see it. Our focus is further out.

So we want to bring our focus back in and get ourselves acquainted with this breath energy in the body. Where does it flow? How does it flow? How do you promote it?

I know some people who push it around a lot, but, by pushing it around, they're not pushing the breath; they're pushing the blood and the lymph, and that can create a lot of pressure in different parts of the body, especially if it gets stuck up in the head. You've got to remind yourself: Breath flows through everything. What runs up against pressure is the liquid element. The breath element doesn't have pressure; it flows, flows, flows.

And it's all around you. Remind yourself that your awareness is not focused ahead of you. We tend to think that it is because our eyes are focused toward the front, but when we close our eyes, we can remind ourselves that our awareness of the body is all-around. So think of the breath bathing you, or that you're wearing the breath all around.

As you think in these ways, you realize you're working both with the breath and with the perceptions around the breath—and that's what analysis of qualities is all about: getting to know the activities of your mind as you engage it in something interesting.

There were people who used to criticize Ajaan Lee, saying, "How can you teach people the breath? What is there to gain insight with? It's just in and out, in and out."

And his response was, "Well, if that's all you see, then that's all there is," the implication being that, if you look more carefully, you see there's a lot more here. The way mental events interact with physical events: It's right here at the breath, with those perceptions that you have of the breath.

So, as you take an inquisitive attitude toward the breath and the mind's relationship to the breath—and toward both of them as they relate to the present moment and as they relate to the process of fabrication going on in the body and the mind—you're bringing your discernment to bear. That discernment is what's going to give you your insights.

But for the insights to get solid, you have to first give rise to a state of concentration. You can say that the seven factors for awakening describe how you go from right mindfulness to right concentration via discernment.

Because the next step is, basically, right effort. Once you see what's skillful and what's not skillful, you focus on what you can do to give rise to what's skillful and let go of what's not, keeping in mind that this is what you want to train the mind in, so that it's its attitude all the time.

As this life goes on, illness comes, aging comes, death is going to come, and you still want to engage in right effort even as you're dying. Think about that. If you're having difficulties right now, think about how difficult it's going to be then.

At the same time, you have to develop the right attitude. On the one hand, you have to accept the things you cannot change, but you also have to have an attitude of defiance—that, whatever opportunity you have *not* to suffer, you’re going to take it.

This is why we look into the qualities of the mind. As we get older, the strength of the body goes down, but the mind doesn’t have to go down that way. But there will be a strong temptation: As the body weakens, the mind weakens as well and tends to give up on any extra efforts. You want to fight that temptation. This is why I said defiance is the proper attitude to take.

We hear so much about acceptance, acceptance, acceptance. And there are things you do have to accept, but you also have to accept the mind’s potential to not suffer, and that requires that you be defiant.

So you’re going to develop your strengths in spite of the weakness in the body, in spite of the difficulties that the body might impose on you.

And, as you’re dealing with the breath, you find that there are ways in which you can breathe that create a lot of discomfort in the body. If you’re engaged in that kind of breathing, you don’t just sit there and continue with it; you figure out what’s wrong, what needs to be changed, and, if you can’t figure anything out, just allow the breath to come in and go out for a while and watch it, without any interference on your part. If the body’s going to breathe, it’s going to breathe on its own. See what it does.

Sometimes you have some preconceived notions about the breath that you’ve been applying—and they’re the problem, but you don’t see them. The best way to see them is to tell yourself, “Okay, no interference—no engagement with the breath at all.” You watch the breath, but you’re not going to do anything to change it. Then see how the body breathes. You may catch sight of something you didn’t see before, and then you can make use of that.

So, right effort is a combination of acceptance and defiance, a combination that we have to keep going, we have to cultivate *now*, so that we can maintain it as things get even more difficult—both outside and inside the body.

When you can do that, there’s going to be a strong sense of energy. The Pāli word *pīti*, here, can mean “rapture,” “refreshment,” “energy.” For some people it’s very strong; for other people, not so strong. Ajaan Lee talks about it as a sense of fullness in the body—that the breath energy seems full: not that you’re pumping up air into the lungs so much, but you get a sense of when the nerves of the body feel depleted and when they feel full of energy. Again, it’s not a frenetic energy; it’s a good, solid energy—Ajaan Lee calls it a solid energy. And what way do you

breathe to give rise to that? How do you think of the breath in a way that gives rise to that? When your efforts are right, there will be that sense of energy.

Then, when you've had enough of that energy, things will grow calm. That's the next factor for awakening.

And then, into concentration: In the steps of breath meditation, they talk about being sensitive to the mind, then gladdening the mind—this is when you energize things—and then concentrating the mind.

In the descriptions of jhana, they say first that you have a sense of ease and refreshment, first based on seclusion—the fact that you're simply not thinking about things that would have a bad impact on your breath energy, a bad impact on your sense of the body right now. There's a sense of ease that comes that way.

But then, as the mind begins to settle in and becomes more and more at one with the breath, you move from calm to concentration, and this is where things begin to seem really strong and solid inside. You maintain that balanced focus, because, at this point, you're no longer engaged in the directed thought and evaluation that are involved in analysis of qualities; you're just there with the object—one with the object.

Then you get to the point where the breath grows very still. The rapture's gone. Even the sense of ease: It's there but it's so subtle that it's more like equanimity. Everything is very, very still. You learn how to maintain that stillness with a sense of balance until there's a sense of equanimity in both body and mind.

That's how dealing with the breath relates to the seven factors for awakening.

Then they, in turn, relate to clear knowing and release. You practice them in such a way that they're based on seclusion—in other words, based on getting the mind in right concentration—and then you develop them so as to give rise to dispassion, cessation, and letting go.

What that means is that you look at your hindrances and your distractions in a way that gives rise to dispassion. You realize that the hindrances are not something barging in from outside; you're actively working at fabricating them. Why are you expending energy in that way? As long as you find them interesting—as long as they have an allure—you'll keep on doing it. But when you see how they arise, how artificial the whole process is, and how, to keep them from passing away, you have to keep them going, you begin to see: What's the allure in these futile activities? Why do you go for them?

Now, the best way to know the allure is to get the mind not to go for them. In other words, order it to stay away from them and see how it complains—"Well, a little bit of this shouldn't be too bad; a little bit of that shouldn't be too bad."

You've got to be firm—"No, no, no"—because you see that the little bit of this or that can eat away at your concentration. They're not innocent little pleasures; they take their toll.

When you can realize the drawbacks, that's when you develop dispassion. And it's because you were fabricating these things to begin with, when you're dispassionate toward them, you see no point in fabricating them any more. They cease, and you just let go of the whole problem.

That's when you're using this five-step method to deal with distractions.

Ultimately, you turn that same five-step analysis onto your own concentration. When things are solidly established—you get better and better at the concentration—you begin to see, "Okay, this too is fabricated. It has its drawbacks." There comes a point where you get exasperated with the fabrication. Why can't there just be stillness without your having to keep on maintaining it, maintaining it, looking after it all the time?

So again, you look for the allure; you look at the drawbacks. Even your concentration has its drawbacks. The Buddha says this of all five of the faculties. They have their allure but also their drawbacks. When you compare those, that's when there's dispassion even for concentration, even for your discernment. You have to let go of that as well.

It does its work but then you put it down, like tools. Making a chair, making a desk: As long as you still haven't finished it, you keep your tools in good shape. When the desk is finished, you don't keep your tools in your hands, because they could scratch or mark up the desk at that point. You put them down.

That's how breath meditation leads to clear release, by going through the factors for awakening.

So, on this night when we commemorate the nagas and the Buddha's teaching breath meditation, think about them together. Try to bring all these things together. When we talk in terms of analyzing this factor and that factor, it seems to scatter things out, but remember that it all concentrates right here. When you're here with a sense of interest in what you're doing, all those factors come together—especially interest motivated by the desire to do this well, and to do this in such a way as to give rise to a solid sense of well-being, and then getting more and more particular about what really counts as well-being.

You're not willing to settle for second-best. Remember the Buddha's teachings on contentment: You're content with your outside conditions but you're not content with the level of skill in the mind, to say nothing of being content with unskillful factors. You work on developing the skillful things even further, and you're mindful to keep at it.

As Ajaan Fuang used to say, “You have to be crazy about the meditation in order to do it well.” That means that it captures your imagination and captures your desire. It challenges you. What would it be like to do this really, really well? When you have that attitude of active interest and curiosity, everything comes together.