

## *On an Even Keel*

*May 6, 2022*

When the Buddha taught breath meditation to his son, he didn't teach *only* breath meditation. He taught a series of attitudes and other meditation topics to augment the practice. One of the most important ones was contemplating the elements of the body, or the properties of the body: earth, water, wind, fire.

Then he proceeded to say, "Make your mind like earth: People throw disgusting things on the earth, but the earth doesn't get disgusted, doesn't react. Make your mind like wind, fire, water. Wind blows dirty things around, but it's not upset. Fire burns garbage, but it doesn't get upset. Water washes away dirt, but it doesn't get upset by the dirt."

The purpose of this reflection is to change your attitude toward pleasure and pain, toward the things you like, the things you don't like, so that they're no big deal. You're going to be trying to observe the mind: how it reacts to pleasure, how it reacts to pain, how it can give rise to pleasure and pain. You want to see these things clearly, and you can see them clearly only if your attitude is on an even keel.

For a lot of us, pleasure and pain are big issues in life. There's so much pain in life, there are so many negative things, that when we get a little bit of pleasure, we just run into it. If it's big enough, we wallow in it. If it's not big enough, we gobble it down.

Ajaan Lee says we have to learn how to see pleasure and pain as words people speak in jest. That's going to require a real rearrangement of our attitudes.

The Buddha says that one of the ways of getting so that your past bad karma doesn't get to you is to learn how to not be overcome by pleasure, not be overcome by pain. Concentration practice is how you do that. You don't stop with simply being nonreactive; you're nonreactive for a purpose, for developing a skill. And the skill is learning how to *use* pleasure and use pain. This is what's radical about the middle way.

We hear that the middle way is a way between the extremes of indulging in sensuality on the one hand, and indulging in self-torture on the other. It sounds as

if it's a middling way, halfway between pleasure and pain. But no, you look at the path itself, and you can see that pleasure and equanimity play a huge role in the right concentration. The four jhanas are defined by their feeling tone.

You want to develop pleasure, you want to develop rapture, but you have to learn how to do it in such a way that you don't destroy your concentration. So you stay with the breath, and you stay with the breath in such a way that you give rise to feelings of pleasure. Part of that is by being steady in your gaze. Part of it has to do with being sensitive, when you breathe in, to how long a breath feels good, and at what point the in-breath becomes too long. Or if it's not long enough, how do you tell that?

You've got to learn how to be sensitive to this area of the body: the breath energy flowing through it. We tend to desensitize ourselves to this, especially as we go through the day in our normal lives. We have so many other things we have to pay attention to that we push this out of our awareness. Now we're trying to bring it back in, realizing that we've been abusing it in a lot of ways. The energy flow in the body has been all bollixed up. Now it's time to let it get back to normal.

So try to be sensitive down into the body. And make your mind like earth. Just watch things for a while. You begin to see that this way of breathing is not so comfortable, but that way of breathing is more comfortable. Your mind is like earth so you can see these things clearly, and then you can take advantage of what you see. Breathe in whatever way is most comfortable, most pleasurable. But you don't want to leave the breath for the pleasure. Just think of the breath and the pleasure going together through the body. The flow of the breath is not only in a line from the nose down into the lungs. It's all over your skin, it's all through your muscles, it's all along the nerves and the blood vessels.

You can sensitize yourself to it either from the inside going out, or start with the outside going in. For example, start with the skin. Think of all the little muscles around the pores relaxing, opening up, and then allow your awareness to move in from there. Or you can start with the fingers and go up the arms. Then with the toes and go up the feet, the legs, the spine, into the skull—whatever way allows you to sensitize yourself here, and have a sense of the breath and the pleasure going together.

Ultimately, you want to see that the breath is something different from the pleasure. But for the purpose of getting the mind to settle down, you want to make them one. Have them all occupy the same place: your awareness, the breath, the sense of pleasure. But keep that perception of breath in mind. Otherwise, you zone out.

If you can't make the breath comfortable, well, again, remember: Make the mind like earth. Tell yourself, "If I can't make it comfortable, just see what the breath does on its own."

You can tell yourself, "If it's going to breathe in, it's going to breathe in on its own. If it's going to breathe out, it's going to breathe out on its own. I'm not going to get involved; I'm just going to watch." That's one way. Another way is to say, "Okay, I'll help it come in, but when it goes out, that's its business. I'm not going to push it out. I'm not going to squeeze it out." Because that's one of the ways we create a sense of discomfort in the body—by squeezing the breath energy out.

So learn to approach this with a balanced attitude, with the mind on an even keel, where you're working for the sake of pleasure and a sense of fullness. Rapture is sometimes too strong a word, but there is a sense of refreshment that can come with this. When things settle down, everything feels like it's right in the right place.

If it's not settling down, just watch and be patient. Again, think of your mind being like earth. Any of the voices in the mind that say, "This is happening too slowly. It's not happening as quickly as I want it": You don't have to listen to them. They're not the voices that will lead to skill.

This is where the image of the committee of the mind is useful. There can be lots of different voices chattering away, and you have the right to choose which ones you're going to identify with, which ones you're not going to identify with. Just because a thought is being offered for you doesn't mean you have to pick it up, take it, and run with it. You're a *wise* committee chairman. The wise committee chairman is very patient: firm, but patient.

When you can make your mind like earth like this, when you can keep it on an even keel like this, then the meditation becomes more and more of a skill. Something you can begin to rely on.

In the beginning, it will have its ups and downs. And there are times, as the meditation advances, when it will have its ups and downs again. But the difference should be that you get more mature. You're not knocked over by the ups and you're not knocked over by the downs. You realize you're here to watch, you're here to learn.

When things go well, then if you get too carried away, you get complacent. When things are not going well and you get carried away with your frustration, that's not going to help at all.

The big difference is that as you get more and more practiced here, pleasure and pain are less of a big deal. They become more and more *tools* that you use, not something that you run to or run away from. That's the whole point of the middle way: We're using pleasure, we're using pain, for a higher purpose.

That's what's radical about it. We're no longer taking them as ends in themselves—they're *means*. And when you can keep them at that status, then you can get the most out of them.