

Farming Your Body & Mind

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We focus on the breath so that we can observe the mind. But begin by giving your full attention to the breath. Try to make the breath something you find interesting.

Be sensitive to how it feels as you breathe in, as you breathe out. Where in the body do you feel the sensations around breathing? And not just the air coming in and out of the nose: When the Buddha talks about the in-and-out breath, he says it's a quality of the *body*, not so much of the air. So where in the body do you feel it? And how does it feel?

You can experiment first with some long, deep in-and-out breaths. Then try shorter breathing, heavier, more shallow, lighter, deeper, faster, slower—to see what rhythm of breathing feels best. Take some time. After all, the breath is the force of life. Here it is, coursing in and out of the body, moving through the different parts—and what is this force of life doing for *your* life?

Notice if there's any tension or tightness in different parts of the body. Try to relax around that. Try to keep yourself sitting straight, but relaxed into a good position, because the Buddha talks about not only the in-and-out breath, but also the breath energies flowing through the body, and they flow best when your posture is good. Some of them flow up, some of them flow down, some of them flow out to every part of the body. See what *you* sense, right here, right now.

And of course, as you're watching the breath you begin to notice the mind: where it's focusing, how it's focusing, whether it's staying with the breath or not. If it wanders off, just very patiently bring it right back. If it wanders off again, bring it back again, because the mind has wandered many, many times in the past. In fact, it spends most of its time wandering around. You don't notice it that much because you're not trying to fight it. It's when you fight it that you begin to realize how deeply ingrained this habit is in the mind.

That's what you've got to fight because the mind is the force that rules your life. It's the force that goes with you as you go through illness, as you go through aging, even as you go through death—and it makes the difference between whether you're going to suffer from those things or not. So, if it's out of control, you're in a bad position.

You want to learn how to bring it into some control here, so you keep bringing it back, bringing it back. And try to make it interested in staying here. Because if you simply force it back, it's like taking an inflated ball, sticking it under the water. Only as long as you have a good grip on it will it stay. If you let go even the least little bit, it pops up into the air. The same way with the breath—and with the mind. If you're forcing the mind to stay here simply through the power of your will, it's going to eject as soon as you have a lapse in mindfulness.

So you've got to give it something it likes to play with here. Ask yourself what you find most interesting right now. It could be the breath itself: thinking about how it flows through the different parts of the body. It could be the way you're talking to yourself about the breath: Here you are talking to yourself all the time, and you ask yourself, "Well, who's talking to whom in here?"

And what are you talking about? The Buddha recommends that, as you get started, you talk about the breath to yourself. He calls this directed thought and evaluation. You choose a topic—in this case you choose the breath—and then you evaluate it. And here the evaluating can deal with: What kind of breathing is comfortable? What way of perceiving the breath is comfortable? When it's comfortable, how do you maintain it? Then, when you maintain it, how can you let that sense of well-being spread? There's a well-being that spreads down the arms, down the legs, throughout the torso, through the head, all around.

Or you can pay attention to your perceptions: These are the labels you have in the mind, the way you picture reality to yourself. Those play a role here, too. How do you picture the breath to yourself? Is it just the air coming in and out through the nose? Or is the flow of energy through the nerves, through the blood vessels? Which perception helps you to settle down more solidly?

There's actually a lot going on right here. There's a lot going on in your mind, in your breath, in your body right now. But we very rarely take an interest in it. We're more interested in other things—things outside. But this is *your* territory in here. It only makes sense that you should try to learn how to make the most of it.

Ajaan Lee's image is of a piece of land that hasn't been cleared. It's full of weeds—pretty useless. But if you clear it, get rid of the stones, get rid of the weeds, plow it, plant seeds, then you can get crops out of it. Here, the crops are a sense of well-being inside. If you give the breath your full attention, it responds. If your attention stays steady, the breath gets steady. If your attention is subtle, the breath gets subtle—and it can provide a good place for you to stay right here in the present moment. Then, when you can stay here, you can watch what the mind is doing. Because, when we say "The mind rules your life," it rules through its intentions. Its intentions then go into actions, words, thoughts, and these are the things that shape your life. They're happening right here, right now.

You want to be coming from a good place when you act on an intention, and you want to see carefully what you're doing. Concentration provides that good place. Then we get focused on the breath so that we can observe the mind as it's focused. When it moves from that focus, we can ask ourselves, "Why? Where's it going? What does it want?"

This is called *metacognition*: where the mind watches the mind. You can think of it as being like a committee where different members of the committee watch other members—although as someone told me recently, he felt that his mind was more like a nursery school: lots of squabbling little kids in there.

But even in a nursery school, there should be an adult in charge. So, you want your adult in charge right now. As you watch: When the mind is going someplace, why is it going? For the time being, you don't want it to go anywhere. You want it to stay right here.

But you also want to take this ability to observe your mind into daily life, so that you can detect when an unskillful intention comes up, one that's based on greed, or aversion, or delusion. You want to see it as it's happening and try to catch it as quickly as you can—before it gets strong, so that you're not carried away by it.

Most people go through life having no idea what their intentions are. An urge comes up, and they just *feel* like it, and they act on it. But there needs to be a filter because you can't trust everything that comes bubbling up in the mind. The Buddha calls these things fermentations, these thoughts that come bubbling up.

Things that ferment are not very reliable. But if you sense them, you can move them in a skillful direction. One of the strongest fermentations, of course, is the desire for pleasure. This is one of the reasons why we try to create a pleasant state of concentration, so that when the mind is hungry for pleasure, you can say, "Well, here it is. Why go looking for it someplace else?" Especially, "Why get engaged in thoughts that are going to have bad consequences?" Here you've got pleasure that's free. All it requires is skill. Nobody else is going to come and try to move in on your breath. This is your territory, right here.

So, in line with Ajaan Lee's image, try to develop this territory well—both the territory of the body right here as it's affected by the way you breathe, and the territory of your mind as it's affected by the way you breathe. See what good crops these things can yield when you tend to them properly.