

Elemental Energy

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When we get in touch with the breath, we're getting in touch with the spot where the mind and the body meet, which makes it a really good place to focus. You look in one direction, and there are physical events; you look in the other direction, there are mental events. You see how they come through the breath to each other, how the body affects the mind through the breath, and how mind can have an effect on the body, through the breath again.

To use the technical terms, there's *nama*, which are mental events, and *rupa*, physical events. Even though the breath itself is physical, it's the closest thing there is in the body to the mind. It's the first thing you realize about the body when you sense it.

When we're sitting here, we tend to think of the body as a solid lump, and the breath as something that comes in and goes out of the lump. We tend to identify with the solid lump, while the breath is something foreign from the outside coming in and going out. But actually, the breath element is what we're most immediately aware of.

If it weren't for the breath, we wouldn't be aware of the body at all. It's the motion of the energy through the body that makes us realize that "Oh, there's a body here." You sense that you're not just floating in space. Then, through the breath, you get to know the other elements. Don't think of them as chemical elements, but more as just elemental properties: warmth, motion, heaviness, movement, coolness. These are the basic feelings we have in the body, and the breath is the most elemental of them all. It's what holds everything else together.

When you back up just to be aware of this sense of the energy flowing through the body, you're getting closer and closer to the mind itself, because when the mind gives orders for the body to move—say, to lift a hand or lift a leg—it has to act through the breath element. And it reacts in lots of other ways as well.

When there's a pain in the body, you'll tend to notice that there's a tendency for the mind to want to tense up around the pain, to keep it under control, to keep the lid on it basically, put bounds around it, and of course in doing so, it often makes the pain worse—just like a person who's a control freak, who has to have this under control, has to have that under control, and often makes the situation worse by trying to have so much control.

One of the skills we pick up as we meditate with the breath is learning how to breathe

through the patterns of tension that we create subconsciously, and in doing so, to bring them to light. We begin to realize the way we react to physical feelings, and how the breath plays a big part in that.

Being with the breath also gives us a handle on mental feelings as well. When a particular mental state arises, there might be too much or too little energy in the mind. You notice that there's a pattern of breathing that goes along with it, and you can get around it by focusing on the breath. Often you don't know where that particular feeling comes from, and in some ways it doesn't really matter. Learn how to deal with it as a present event rather than trying to trace it back into the past, and you find that you get better and better at handling these things.

Dealing with the breath in this way is your first line of defense. Say that anger arises and it really seems to be taking over the mind. The first thing to do is to stop and remember, "Okay, this is not something I want in the mind. This is not something I want to have power over me."

If you can't handle the anger directly as a mental event, work on its physical side first. Notice where the tension is, how the rhythm of breathing has changed with the anger, and consciously change it back to something more normal and soothing. This won't get rid of the cause of the anger, but at least it'll give you a handle on how to deal with it, how to create a beachhead for yourself.

As the physical side of the anger begins to calm down, you can look at the mental side directly and not feel so overwhelmed by it, not feel that you've got to get it out of your system. Most of that sense of having to get it out of your system has to do with a disturbance in the breathing. The breathing feels uncomfortable, tight and constricted, and you just want to get that feeling of constriction out. But if you can breathe through it, dissolve it away with good, calm, measured breathing, then the sense that you have to get it out of your system or the sense that it's being bottled up dissolves away as well.

What you're left with is the mental side of the anger, and that way it's a lot easier to deal with. You can look at it, and say, "Okay, is this something I should act on now? Is there any real injustice here? If so, what should I say now? Or is now not the time, not the best time to say anything or do anything? Should I wait to another time?"

When you don't have that sense of constriction or being bottled up, it's a lot easier to deal with anger more rationally and to deal with unpleasant situations. In cases where you may have to say something to set the situation right, it's easier to figure out exactly what's the best thing to say. Or if it's time to be quiet and wait till a better opportunity to speak, okay, you'll begin to see that more easily as well.

What this boils down to is that when you're dealing with the breath, you've got a handle both on physical events and on mental events that you didn't have before. You've got a basic principle for a skill that can be used in all kinds of ways.

When you read through those four basic, beginning steps of breath meditation in the Buddha's list of the 16, don't think that they're things to do only on the meditation cushion. Getting in touch with short breathing, getting in touch with long breathing, learning how to breathe while aware of the whole body, learning how to calm the breath: These are all basic survival skills you need wherever you go. They'll keep you in the present, give you a handle for dealing with anger as it arises or greed or lust or fear or whatever the emotion may be, and if nothing is arising, you've got the breath. It gives you a good place to stay. It's a home for the mind.

They used the word in Pali *vihara dhamma*, which literally means a home for the mind, shelter for the mind. That's what the breath can be. It can also be nourishment. When the breath is comfortable, it gives you something good to feed on so that you're not hungry for praise from other people, or for this or that from other people. You've got something good to feed on right here in the present moment, so you don't need other people's stuff. After all, the nature of the mind is that it's going to feed, and if you don't have something good to feed inside, you're going to go start looking outside. And because it's nature is to feed, it'll take whatever it can to stuff in its mouth. Often what it feeds on are the really unpleasant things that happen. It worries about this, gets upset about that, all from feeding in the wrong places because it's hungry. But if you got a good sense of satisfaction just breathing in, breathing out, a sense of fullness, a sense of ease that comes from the breath, then you've got a good place to feed right there, and you don't need other people's scraps.

The ability to calm the breath, be aware of the whole body, is a good tool for dealing with anger, fear, whatever emotion comes up and creates disturbances in the breathing, makes it feel unpleasant to be in your body.

So being with the breath has lots of uses, from everyday uses to deeper uses, just like a person who's a skilled carpenter and can use his skills just to bang together something simple in a few minutes, or work on long-term projects that require lots of skill. It's not that you work only on the big projects. Whatever needs to be done, you've got the skills, ranging from everyday issues to ones that might make a real difference within the mind, really reshape the way the mind relates to its whole range of experience. That's the kind of skill that breath meditation is.

So you find, as you're sitting here, that it's not just in-out, in-out, one, two, three, four, *buddho, buddho*. There's a lot going on with the breath energy and a lot of different ways the mind can relate to it. The reason we need so much time to practice meditation is to get a sense of what's going on, and of the implications, the possibilities of this combination of awareness and breath energy in the body.

Ajaan Lee used to say there are three basic things you need to do in the meditation. One is just learning how to do it to begin with, to get the mind to settle down; two, learning how to maintain it; and three, learning how to put it to use. That's what we're doing right here—learning how to get the mind to stay with the breath energy and then getting a sense of what it's good for, because it's good for all kinds of things.