

What Focus? What Breath?

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Focus on the breath: That's how meditation instructions begin. A single sentence, takes just a few seconds to say it, but it can take months and years to figure out what it means to focus, and what the breath is. In the course of figuring these things out, you learn an awful lot of important lessons both about the body and about the mind.

In terms of the breath, you have look at what your preconceived notions are, what's happening here as you breathe. When we say to breathe in with the whole body, often you find that there's a subconscious idea that your body is like a big lung, a big sack, into which the breath comes, and then it goes out. You think that there's a membrane surrounding the breath that you bring in, there's a boundary to it. But what does the breath have to do with boundaries? It's basically energy flow. In Thai, the word for *breath* is the same as the word for *wind*. Where is the boundary to the wind?

A closer label of our mental picture of the breathing process would be of the body being bathed with the breath, or permeated by the breath from all directions. If you saw the movie *Goldfinger*, you may remember why the woman dies: She was painted gold. Even though she could still breathe through her mouth and her nose, the breath energy through the pores, the oxygen exchange at the pores, was cut off, and that killed her. That's what happened in the story. In reality, she wouldn't have died, but experience with full-body make-up has shown that she would have fainted.

So there is some breathing that goes through the pores, an important part of the breathing process. When you think of letting the breath come in, put the emphasis on the *letting*. It's like letting the wind come to your house. You don't pull the wind in or push it out the other direction. You simply open the windows, open the doors, and the wind will come in and go out on its own.

Try to keep that mental picture in mind, because otherwise we force the breath in all kinds of unnatural ways that can be bad for the body—because that's the other problem: our ideas of what it means to focus. When we focus on something, we usually tense up around it. You focus on the head, you can give yourself headaches; you can focus on your abdomen, and you give yourself abdominal problems. The problem comes from the way you focus, tensing up. This is why Ajaan Lee says, when you get a sense of comfort in the body, to think of it spreading, spreading, spreading in all directions. Again, you don't want to

build up a wall around the sensations. You want to let them permeate any sense of wall or barrier, so that your focus, your awareness has the same quality of the breath: It permeates the whole body, surrounds the whole body, rather than squeezing it and placing a boundary around it.

These are just a couple of examples of how our perception of the breath, and our perception of the focusing, the way we focus, can cause problems. You have to use the process of de-perception. Try to ferret out exactly what your perception, what your mental picture of the process is. Or catch yourself in the process of, say, tensing up around something as you focus on it, and learn how to question that perception. Question the mental picture that says that focus means tensing up. Replace it with a better perception, one that allows you to focus on the breath without distorting the breath, and without causing any physical problems—and at the same time giving yourself a really comfortable place to stay.

This is an important principle in the practice. You're not going to overcome sensual pleasure unless you have a better pleasure in concentration. You're not going to overcome sensual attachments and sensual desire unless you have a better place to stay inside. Otherwise, you'd be denying yourself up to a certain point, then the issue of frustrated desire will come in, take over, and drive you out. But if you can actually give yourself a viscerally pleasant place to stay, then you have more of the voices in the mind on your side.

Ajaan Lee makes this point over and over again: You've got to get your defilements on your side as you practice. Give yourself a good place to stay, and your attachment will tend to focus here, your desire will tend to focus here. In that way, they become a force for the path. Remember, right effort includes desire, the desire to get rid of any unskillful states that are there, and to prevent unskillful states that haven't come yet from arising; the desire to give rise to skillful states and then to maintain them and bring them to fruition. Without that desire, the practice doesn't go anywhere.

Or as Ajaan Fuang used to say, you have to be crazy about the meditation in order for the meditation to go well. You really have to like it, to enjoy it, be fascinated by it.

So give yourself a pleasant place to stay and give yourself some interesting questions to ask about staying here with the breath, learning both about the object you're focusing on, and about the activity of focusing. This is what *sampajañña*, alertness, means: having a sense of what you're doing and the results of what you're doing.

When you learn about the simple act of focusing, you can begin to see the impact it has on the breath and on the body. That sensitizes you to a lot of the

other activities going on in the mind: the intentions you have, the results of those intentions. This, for the Buddha, was the big issue, because it's through the way we intend that we cause stress and suffering. But if we're not sensitive to what we're doing, we don't see the connection. The stress seems to be out there, in the things arising and passing away. And partly it is there: The simple fact of arising and passing away means that events of experience have some stress built in to them. But the stress that's really important, the suffering that's really important, is the suffering that comes from craving, and that's an activity. In fact, there's a sutta where the Buddha talks about craving as a path of practice, an unskillful path of practice, but a path of practice that most of us live by. Until you can begin to see the impact of even simple intentions in the mind, you're not going to realize what path of practice you've been following, or of the results that come directly from that path of practice.

So simply focusing on the issue of how to focus on the breath, what it means to focus, what breath is, which sensations you're experiencing that are breath sensation, which ones are liquid sensations, which ones are earth sensations or fire sensations, you learn a lot about mental and physical events, *nama-rupa* they call it. It's all right here. It's not abstract. It's immediately present in the act of focusing on the breath, simply a question of being more and more sensitive to what's right here. That's when you learn about these things.

Look for the role that intention plays in taking the potential for a physical and mental experience, and turning it into the actual experience. Again, all of these things are right here, but we're blind to them. It's like coming across a sign that has a finger pointing off to the right. We immediately look off to the right. We don't look at the sign. Thoughts come up in the mind and they point us in another direction. Rather than looking at the actual process, or looking at the looking, we look in whichever direction the thoughts point, so we miss a lot of things that are going on right before our eyes.

The choices we make, the way we focus right here in the present moment on this breath, this breath, this breath: That contains all the lessons we need to learn. If you can develop the imagination to ask the right questions, and the ability to see in an all-around way, you'll see—because a lot of the insights that you want to gain in the practice are the things that you see out of the corner of your mental eye.