

Befriending the Breath

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The air is cool and still. Try to make your mind cool and still as well. Bring it to the breath. Tell yourself you're going to become friends with the breath. All too often, what happens when you're meditating and you have trouble staying with your meditation object, is that it starts to become your enemy, your opponent. You try to squeeze it and force it down, to get it under your control, but that just makes things worse. It gets more and more difficult to stay. You want to be on good terms with the breath. After all, it is the force that keeps body and mind together. And if you're not on good terms with your breath, you're in a lot of trouble.

So approach the breath as you would any potential friend, realizing that it's going to take time and you have to be very observant to develop a real friendship. You can focus on the breath anywhere in the body that seems comfortable—it might be the tip of the nose, the base of the throat, the middle of the chest, down in your abdomen, any part of the body that lets you know clearly that now the breath is coming in, now the breath is going out. You can sense it, and it feels comfortable to focus your attention there. Then allow the breath to stay comfortable. After all, it is a flow of energy. You can't bottle it up. If you try bottling it up, it makes things tight and constricted in the body.

Just keep tabs on the energy. Think of it as watching a river. The river flows past. Even if you put your foot in the river trying to stop it, the river goes around, keeps flowing past, flowing past. So your only duty is just to watch it flow past. Keep track of it. You can adjust the flow a little bit here and there so that it feels good, it feels refreshing to breathe in, feels relaxing to breathe out. You want to develop this sense of friendship inside, so that wherever you go, you have this inner friend going with you. Even though there maybe discordant things happening in the world, at least you've got harmony inside. And that's what matters. When you're acting from harmony, your actions are harmonious. Your words are harmonious. Your thoughts are harmonious. You protect yourself in this way. You become a force for harmony in the world as well.

This is an important principle. All the important qualities we need to develop in our relations with other people, we first have to develop within ourselves, in our relationship to the breath.

Start out with thoughts of goodwill, as in that chant we had just now on goodwill, compassion, appreciation, and equanimity. Have goodwill for your

breath. You want it to be comfortable. Compassion is where you see that the breath is not comfortable, and you learn various ways of helping it along, to make it more comfortable, so that you feel more at ease breathing in and breathing out. You feel restricted. The body doesn't feel tight. Once it starts feeling comfortable, then you appreciate it, realizing that the sense of ease inside the body, if you pay enough attention to it, will grow. It's something that's really important, so you do your best to maintain it.

One of the chants we have regularly contains the line, "having respect for concentration," and it means just this: having a sense of the importance of keeping your mind centered, keeping things good inside, so that you're on good terms with the breath, on good terms with your body. In the beginning, it may not seem like much, just a very ordinary sense of well-being. Well, allow it to stay. And don't let anything in the cycle of the breath—the in-breath or the out-breath or the pauses between the breaths—destroy that. Then you may begin to notice that at certain points of the breathing cycle you tighten things up to, say, mark the end of one breath or the beginning of another breath. You don't have to tighten up at all. You don't have to punctuate things. Allow the flow to be easy all the way through the in-breath, all the way through the out-, and all the way through the spaces in between, so that you're floating on a comfortable breath energy.

When you can maintain that, the sense of well-being inside begins to grow. Allow it to become continuous, so that it develops momentum.

And then finally equanimity: If you find a certain parts of the breath energy that you can't help in this way, just chalk it up to past kamma and focus on the areas where you *can* help. This is an important principle about equanimity. The Buddha's not saying to be indifferent to everything. He says there are certain things that you simply have to accept the way they are. You leave them alone because you can't change them. That gives you the energy to focus on the things you *can* change.

So when the breath starts feeling comfortable in the spot that you're focused on, think of that sense of comfort seeping out to different parts the body. Ajaan Lee gives ideas about how to direct it, but those are just general principles. You may find that your body has a different pattern of energy flow. So explore. When there's a sense of ease, think of it spreading out. You might think of it as melted butter spreading through the body, seeping through whole body, filling it with a sense of ease as you breathe in, ease as you breathe out, and dissolving away any sense of tension or tightness you may feel in different parts the body.

Once you get this sense of ease filling the body, it's a lot easier to stay with the breath. You can start becoming more and more friendly with the breath. And

when you get on good terms with the breath, it's a lot easier to be on good terms with other people. If you're carrying around a sense of inner irritation or inner disharmony, it's hard to be kind, generous, or harmonious with other people. You've got to start from within. Once you develop this good relationship with your breath, then it's a lot easier to be on good terms with the people around you, and to be really helpful to them, because you're not burdening yourself down with unnecessary suffering. That way you have more energy to help the people around you, to deal with whatever their issues are.

So it comes down to having the right relationship between body and mind. We read the texts. We read the instructions. They're meant to give you a general idea of what you might learn as you try to get more and more familiar with the breath. But you find as in any friendship, that there may be unexpected things. So be observant. Keep your eyes open. Do your best to be alert and mindful, and over time you find that you've developed a really good friend, a friend that will see you through all kinds of difficulties.