

## *Healing Breath*

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There's a passage in the Canon where one of the Buddha's students is sick. The Buddha goes to teach him the seven factors for awakening, and the student recovers. There's another time when the Buddha himself is sick, and one of his students comes and recites for him the seven factors for awakening, and the Buddha recovers. So there's been a tradition that these teachings are healing both for the body and for the mind—especially for the mind, because the diseases of the mind are the most important.

So as we meditate, it's good to recall these qualities to use them to treat whatever disease we have in our minds. It's especially important to bring them to the breath as we meditate. Try to develop each of these seven qualities in your breathing, so the breathing can be healing and healthy both for body and for mind.

The first factor is mindfulness. Mindfulness here means any of the four establishings of mindfulness, each of which entails three qualities. First is mindfulness itself, which means the ability keep something in mind. In this case, you focus on the breath in and of itself as a sensation. Notice where in the body you sense it, but try to keep in mind that you're going to stay with the breath.

The second quality is alertness. That's the actual watching—watching the mind to make sure it stays with the breath, and watching the breath to see how comfortable it is.

The third quality is ardency, where you make the effort to do this skillfully, so that the mind feels at ease with the breath. It's not being trapped or tied down in a way that it feels it's losing its freedom. But we're not treating it so casually that it just slips in and slips out.

This quality of ardency actually includes the second and third factors for awakening. The second factor is called analysis of qualities—i.e., qualities of the mind—seeing whether they're skillful or not. It's probably the most important distinction of the Buddha's teachings. Some things are skillful, some things are not, based on the results they give both now and on into the future. So you have to learn how to read your mind. When you're coming to the breath, are you coming in a skillful way or an unskillful way? Do the notions you have about meditation get in the way or are they actually helpful?

The third factor is persistence, which means once you notice that something is unskillful, you do your best to abandon it, and *abandon* here means that when you

notice that you're doing something unskillful, you stop doing it. Then try to make sure you don't pick it up again. As for skillful qualities, if you see that they're lacking, you try to bring them into being. Once they are there, you try to maintain them so that they grow.

So those are the basic principles in what we're doing here. We want to be mindful, alert, and ardent. The ardeny includes the element of wisdom, which sees what's skillful and what's not in your mind, together with the effort to encourage what's skillful and to abandon what's not. So you want to bring these qualities to the breath. As Ajaan Lee once said, the breath is like a solvent for medicine; the qualities of mind are the actual medicine itself. So you want to be alert to how the breath feels.

When the Buddha gives his breath instructions, he starts out by saying to bring mindfulness to the fore, then very mindfully breathe in, breathe out. He doesn't say where you focus on the breath. Actually, you can focus anywhere in the body where you feel the sensation of breathing. And you try to become sensitive to variations in the breath, noticing when the breath longer, when it's shorter, when it's deeper, or when it's more shallow, when it's heavier or lighter. Notice the effect that these different ways of breathing have on the body. Find one spot where it's easy to stay focused on the sensation of breathing, and begin to get a sense of what kind of breathing is going on. Learn how to read the breathing. Become sensitive to its variations. Then stay there until you find that the breath gets more comfortable, more at ease.

In the texts, they talk about then spreading your awareness to fill the whole body, to be aware of the whole body as you breathe in, the whole body as you breathe out. After that, you calm the effects of the breath in the body. If you find the way of breathing feels harsh or disruptive to the body, abandon it. Breathe in a way that feel soothing, nourishing. Ajaan Lee recommends that you do it the other way around. In other words, you get the breath so that it feels soothing, and *then* you spread your awareness to fill the body, at the same time allowing that sense of ease and pleasure to spread to fill the body. Either way works. You might want to experiment to see which way works for you.

But the important thing to notice here is that the Buddha recommends that you *train* yourself to do these things. In other words, you're not simply dealing with the breath as a given phenomenon. You want to see how there's an element of intention in the breath, that's why it's called *kaya-sankhara*, a fabricating element in the body. The word *sankhara*, fabrication, includes the meaning of intention. There's an intentional element in the way you breathe. You want to sensitize yourself to that. And you want to calm that, to make it more nourishing,

more soothing and easeful for the body. The best way to keep it soothing and easeful is try to be as steady in your alertness as possible. If you jump around too much, things don't have a chance to calm down. And it's the steadiness of your alertness that requires the breath to get more easeful, because the comfortable breathing that we tend to subject ourselves often to happens during the moments when we're not paying careful attention. We're jumping around here, jumping around there, and in the midst of the jump, the body tends to react in different ways. But if your focus is steady, it helps to iron out, smooth out any roughness in the breath.

As the breath gets nourishing in this way, easeful in this way, the next factor for awakening comes, which is rapture. The Pali word for *rapture* here actually carries a lot of different meanings in English: refreshment, a sense of fullness, a sense of satisfaction. It's important to know that it has a wide range of meanings. Rapture tends to be pretty intense, but a sense of refreshment is something you might notice quite early on, especially if you've been breathing in a heavy or uncomfortable way. As soon as you switch to more comfortable breathing, the body feels refreshed. You want to maintain that sense of refreshment. And as the Buddha says, you indulge in it. In other words, you allow it to fill the body, you allow the mind to enjoy it, to be refreshed by it as well.

This sense of refreshment is what really heals and soothes the mind. You're finding a sense of pleasure and ease from within that's in no way blameworthy. You're not harming anyone else; you're not harming yourself. You're not indulging in unskillful states of mind.

When the body's been nourished and refreshed like this, it develops a sense of serenity. The mind develops serenity as well. This is the fifth factor for awakening. Nothing is disturbing you, and the mind isn't disturbing itself.

This forms the basis for concentration, the sixth factor. The mind can really settle down and be solidly established in the singleness of its object—*singleness* here being singleness both in the sense of having one object and in the sense that this one object, like the breath, fills your awareness. Your perception of the breath is such that you can see every sensation in the body is related to the way you breathe in one way or another, even the flow of energy in your nerves, the flow of energy through your blood vessels. The breath is a very light and quick movement of energy throughout the solid and liquid and warm parts of the body, and it's not disturbing anything.

As the mind develops a sense of concentration, being solidly established right here, there also comes a sense of equanimity, the seventh factor for awakening. Again, there's a lack of disturbance. After the mind's been refreshed by the sense

of pleasure and ease that come from serenity, it doesn't even have to focus on them any moment. There's a sense of stillness. The breath is still; the mind is still. As the Buddha said, when you're aware of this equanimity, there's a very subtle level of pleasure here, but that's perfectly okay. It's not disturbing you; it's not creating any kind of affliction for you at all. Ordinarily, the mind can make itself afflicted even with pleasure. It gets attached to it, and when the pleasure goes away, then it's upset, struggles again to find pleasure.

Here you use that tendency of the mind to get it to settle down, by supplying it with the pleasure that comes from the breathing, but then there comes a point where the body has been soothed, the mind's been soothed, the sense of well-being is so well established that you don't have to think about it anymore. The mind can enter a state of equanimity, a sense of evenness. Everything is on an even keel.

All these factors, taken together, are healing for the mind. As you infuse them in the breath, both body and mind are soothed and brought to a state of health. When the mind is soothed in this way, it can develop the factor of analysis of qualities even more deeply. That's where it turns into the faculty of wisdom, the faculty of discernment, as you can start digging deeper and deeper into the roots of the mind's tendency to disturb itself. When you simply bring the mind to concentration, that doesn't solve all the mind's problems, but it does put it in a position where it can start using its discernment in a deeper and subtler way.

But it's important that you not be in too great a hurry to rush through the concentration to get to the discernment, because the work you need to do requires a lot of strength, a lot of equanimity. It requires all these qualities that are developed as you bring the mind into a state of good healthy concentration, through developing the factors for awakening.

And as with many diseases, you can't expect just one shot in the arm to make the disease go away. You've got to keep up the treatment for a long time. Part of the reason for this, of course, is that the mind itself is the doctor. The Buddha was the kind of doctor who didn't give injections. He gave people prescriptions, told them what to do, gave them an exercise routine, told them what medicines to use. He basically taught the person how to be his or her own doctor.

That's what we're doing here, learning to be a doctor to our own ailments.

So it'll take a while to develop skill and to develop the strength you need in order to be a very perceptive doctor. But even in the beginning stages, you find that as long as you stick by this principle of being mindful, alert, and ardent, sensitive to how the breathing feels, and doing your best to make the breath

soothing, nourishing for the body, you've got your course of treatment off to a good start.