

## *Exploring the Basics*

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Try to stay focused on the breath. In the beginning it sounds pretty simple, and it is. It's a very simple activity, but our mind is very complex. Often we have to clear away a lot of complex issues before we can actually settle down with the breath and be able to stay focused.

First it's good to understand what the breath is or what we're talking about when we say "breath." It's not just the air coming in and out of the lungs. It's the movement of energy in the body, and some of that goes along with the movement of the breathing. Try to think of the whole body and notice which parts of the body feel one way with the in-breath and another way with the out-. Different people will feel these sensations in different places. You may find them focused in the head, in the neck, the shoulders, the chest. Or you may have a more diffuse sense of in-flowing energy and out-flowing energy anywhere in the body at all. All of that counts as breath.

The first thing you want to do is to find one area where it's clearest that now the breath is coming in, now the breath is going out. Allow your attention to settle there.

Then there's the *quality* of focus. It's very easy to fall into old habits, that when we focus on something we tense up around it in order to highlight it in our awareness. But that simply creates a sense of discomfort, blockage in the body. So one of the skills of concentration is knowing how to stay focused without tensing up around the spot you're focused on. In my early years with Ajaan Fuang, he would say, "Try to catch hold of the breath." So I would subconsciously tense up around it to catch it. One day I happened to be sitting on a bus in Bangkok and in an unexpected moment realized that the tensing up around it, the trying to catch it, was making the breath uncomfortable. When I just allowed it to flow in and out on its own without catching it, it seemed fine.

Of course, being an American, I went back and I criticized him for saying to "catch" the breath. He laughed at me, said that's not what he meant, not to tense up around it simply to stick with it, to stay with it, but try to exert as little pressure on the breath as possible—just enough pressure to stay with it but otherwise no more than that.

Then there's the whole issue of staying here. For different people, that's going to involve different things. For some of us, we have to have good reasons to stay here, either in terms of our view of the world or our narrative of our life. Why are you here trying to stay focused on the breath? Ideally, it should be because you realize that the mind causes itself a lot of suffering and this is part of the way out.

As you learn how to be sensitive of the breath, you get in touch with one way in which the mind shapes its experience. The breath is one of the few functions of the body that can be controlled intentionally. The Buddha classes it as a type of fabrication, bodily fabrication—the

in-and-out breath. You want to be sensitive to how you breathe. Bring some awareness to the process of breathing so that it causes less suffering, less stress, less tension, less blockage in the body. You can bring that sense of ease to bear the other forms of fabrication.

The way you talk to yourself about the breath is called verbal fabrication. You don't have to talk out loud, just in your mind. What are you telling yourself about the breath? Ideally, it should be two things: one, how you keep reminding yourself to stay with the breath. When you remind yourself, are you strict and nasty or are you more encouraging? It's best to be encouraging. It makes it a lot easier to stay here. And then, two, you evaluate the breath. That's the other kind of verbal fabrication. How does the breathing feel? Does it feel good? What could you do to make it feel better? What would "feeling better" feel like? What kind of breathing would you like to breathe right now? It's not that you hold in mind some idea of what the ideal breath must be and strive toward that. Just ask yourself: What would feel really good right now?

It's like all the great classics of world literature. When you're young, you hear about all these classics and you say, "Oh my gosh, it sounds like a big mountain I have to climb just to get through the classic." Then you get into it and you find a large part of why the work is a classic is because it's so much fun to read. It's engaging. And that's how it should be with the breath.

Ask yourself: What kind of breathing would feel really good right now in your stomach? What kind would feel really good around the heart area? How about in the throat? How about in the face? Around your eyes, around your ears, anywhere in the body that seems especially sensitive and would really like to have some nice breath energy to soothe it. Then just keep on top of that. If, after a while, it's had enough of that kind of energy, what other part of the body seems to be lacking breath energy? And what kind of breathing would it enjoy? What would feel really good or soothing or energizing or relaxing?—whatever the body needs right now, whatever it wants right now. The whole point of concentration is that it has to be engaging, enjoyable for it to last.

Then finally there's what's called mental fabrication, which is the perception you have of the breath together with the feelings you create in the way you fabricate the breath in other ways. So here we're perceiving the breath as an energy and perceive it as something that's already there.

Sometimes when there's a pain in the body, you find that the muscles involved in the breathing process tend to cringe around the pain, tend to avoid it, but that sets up other ripples and eddies of uncomfortable breath energy in other parts of the body. Remind yourself that the breath is there first. The breath is your primary experience of the body, even before you experience solidity, you feel energy—even before you feel warmth, before you feel the liquid feelings in the body, even before you feel pain. The breath is there first, so give it priority. Remind yourself: The breath can go right through any obstacle in the body. Think in that way. Hold that perception in mind and see what it does to the breathing.

Or you can remind yourself that the skin is one of the primary breathing organs of the body. We're taught so much about the role of the lungs that we forget that the skin breathes as well. So think of all the pores in the skin opening up, opening up all around—in front, in back, all around you. Breath energy can come in and out of there as well. See what that perception does to your experience of the breath.

At the very least, working with these different forms of fabrication—the in-and-out breath, directed thought and evaluation, feelings and perceptions—gives you something interesting to do. That helps with the staying power of the meditation because after all, the mind is a very complex organ. Training the mind is not a matter of forcing it into a few simple and draconian modes. To train the mind, you have to engage the whole mind. So remind yourself that when the body breathes in a healthy way, it's healthier. The organs of the body get to have good blood circulation. When the body feels better, the mind's going to feel better as well. When the mind feels good, it's a lot more likely to act in skillful ways—to be able to let go of unskillful intentions and to stir up the energy to act on skillful intentions.

All of these are good reasons for coming here to focus on the breath. Then if, at some point during the hour, the mind starts rebelling, you've got an array of arguments to use with it, to encourage it, to remind it: This is why we're here. You want to stay right here. You don't want to wander off.

The other issue with staying with the breath, of course, is a tendency to fall asleep when the breath gets comfortable. It's one of the habits of the mind: that when there's a sense of ease and well-being in the body, you just drift off. "Everything seems fine, okay, so let's go to sleep." You've got to fight that tendency. This is one of the reasons we try to develop a whole-body awareness and keep it whole-body, because that tends to counteract the tendency to drift off. If you're all-around aware of the body—the hands and the feet, the arms, the legs, the back, the shoulders, the different parts of the face and head, the chest, the stomach, all at once, filling up the present moment with your awareness like this—it's very hard for it to shrink down and slip off. There is that quality of shrinking that goes along with the sleepiness of the mind. So if you're thinking "expansive, expansive, expansive throughout the whole body," that counteracts that tendency.

You also find that there are ways of breathing that put you to sleep, other ways that will wake you up. So if you find yourself getting drowsy or dozy, try to breathe in a way that's more enlivening. This, too, will help you stay with the breath, stay focused on the breath.

Then there's the whole issue of trying. This is something you want to stick with, something you do have to put effort into, but the effort has to be skillful. Part of skillful effort is that sense of encouragement, what the Buddha calls generating desire. Think in whatever way you can to keep this from seeming like a chore. Remind yourself that this is something you really value: the opportunity to be here. You look forward to understanding your own breath energy. This is part of your awareness that can be so crucial and yet it gets so overlooked, so pushed off into

the corner. Here's your chance to bring it out into the open.

Then you have to be watchful as part of the trying. Any little thing that's going to come in to pull you off, you have to be alert to it. The more quickly you can catch it, the easier it is to stay with the breath. So you have to learn how to read the warning signals that the mind's about to drift off. Learn how to know how it's sending messages to you that it's getting ready to go.

This is an important lesson in opening up some of the issues of your mind, because the mind does have a tendency to hide some of its less skillful intentions from itself, and this is one instance of them right here. Part of it wants to go, and it knows that the program for tonight is staying with the breath, so it'll gradually elbow its way in surreptitiously and all of a sudden, *whoops!* there it goes—you're gone. Learn how to notice the elbowing in and notice the tendency the mind has to pretend that it's not happening.

Once you can see through that, you'll be a lot more squarely with the breath, more solidly with the breath.

Then you have to judge the amount of effort you're putting in. Ajaan Fuang gives the image of standing behind a child, holding your hands around the child as the child's beginning to walk. If you actually touch the child's body, the child will never get a chance to walk on its own. So you have to keep your hands an inch or two away from the child's body to give it some freedom. But at the same time, you have to be right there, ready to notice when it's starting to trip, starting to fall. You're ready to catch it. That's the kind of quality you want to have around the mind, around the breath: keeping watch over things.

So those are some of the things to keep in mind as you try to stay focused on the breath. These are the basic elements of concentration, and it's good to stay close to the basic elements even if you've been meditating for a long time. The really good meditators keep coming back to the basics because if you do, you'll find there's an awful lot to see here. A lot of the mind's issues are right there in the basics. When you start getting off into other areas, if you lose touch with the basics, you can start floating off and there's nothing to keep you grounded.

So if you're starting out, try to be clear about the basics. And if you're an experienced meditator, keep coming back to the basics—because everything you need to know, everything you need to discover, is all right here.