

A Gift of Well-Being

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When you meditate, you have to think about what you're doing. As for other thoughts, you can put them aside.

Think about the breath and ask yourself, "What kind of breathing would be most comfortable?" You can experiment. See what kind of results you get. Does long breathing feel good now? Ajaan Lee recommends starting out with long breathing as a way of energizing the body and energizing the mind. Then let the breath find its own rhythm. But it often helps to nudge it a little bit. Instead of just breathing the way you normally do day after day, try experimenting with the breath. Long in, short, out. Short in, long out. Heavier or lighter than normal. Faster or slower. Deeper or shallower.

See what kind of breathing gives rise to a sense of ease, well-being, and refreshment in the body. Notice which parts of the body seem to be most sensitive to the way you're breathing. Often they'll be around the neck or in the heart area. But they could be anywhere.

Once you've found a way of breathing that feels good in one of your more central areas, you may want to explore the rest of the body. Make a systematic survey going through all the different parts. Notice how they feel when you breathe in and out. Which side of the body seems to be holding more tension? For example, if you're focusing on the back, notice: In it the upper back, is the left side or the right side holding more tension? Then go down to the lower back. How about there? Down through your legs. You find that the tension tends to be distributed in very unusual ways. Sometimes the right shoulder may be holding more tension than the left shoulder, but your left hip is holding more tension than the right hip. Get to know the way the body feels right now and how it plays a role in the breathing, how every part in the body plays a role in the breathing. This helps to relax a lot of the tension that you tend to hold throughout the day.

But this is more than just a relaxation technique. If you really want to get the most benefits out of it, you try to keep the body as relaxed as possible as you go throughout the day. This way you begin to notice when certain types of thoughts or emotions rise up inside you. What do they do to the breath energy, and how can you use the breath energy to undercut the unskillful emotions and thoughts? In this way, you're not wounding yourself as you go through the day. And you're less likely to wound others. If you have a sense of well-being right here, the part of the mind that feels dissatisfied and is down on you then wants to spread a little of

that dissatisfaction around to other people, too. “As long as we’re feeling miserable, let’s let other people feel miserable, too”: That kind of mind state gets undercut when you’re feeling refreshed and full all the way through the in-breath and all the way through the out-. When you can maintain that sense of fullness, refreshment, and well-being all through the day, why on earth would you want to cause trouble either to yourself or to other people?

This is why this practice is not a selfish practice. It’s based on the understanding that your actions have an impact both on yourself and on other people. Where do your actions come from? They come from the mind, the state of the mind right now. If you learn how to tend to that state, your actions will be a lot more skillful and a lot more appropriate for the situation. It’s in this way that the meditation is a gift to yourself and to other people, just at the practice as a whole is a gift.

This is clearest in generosity. You have something and you see that someone else needs it. You realize that you can do without it. You’re happy to give it away. This applies not only to material things, but also to your knowledge, your time, your sense of fairness, your forgiveness. When you learn to develop generosity in these ways, both sides benefit. The people who are the recipients of your generosity benefit, and you benefit. It helps you realize that there are forms of happiness in this world that are not zero-sum games—i.e., you gain, somebody else loses, or they gain and you lose. This is something where both sides gain.

It’s the same with virtue. When you abstain from unskillful behavior, it’s a gift. You can make the promise to yourself and keep it that you’re not going to harm anybody in any situation regardless: no killing, no stealing, no illicit sex, no lying, no taking of intoxicants. You can hold to that promise. You don’t keep making excuses to yourself saying, “Well, this animal is inconvenient. Let’s just get it out of the way.” Or, “This is just a little white lie, it really doesn’t matter if I lie.” You’ve got to make sure that you don’t give in to those ideas. You’re giving safety to everybody. People can trust your words. People can trust your behavior. As you give safety to everybody, you have a share in that universal safety as well. So that’s the kind of happiness where, instead of drawing a boundary between yourself and other people, you’re actually erasing the boundary.

The same principle applies to the meditation. As you can develop a greater sense of well-being inside, you look at the different voices in your mind that say, “Do this, do that.” You look at what they’re saying and you realize that if you did those things, you’d be harming yourself and other people. You realize that a lot of the power of those voices comes from a sense of irritation inside. You can learn how to soothe out that irritation. Breathe right through it. Think of the breath as a salve or a cream that you put on the mind. Then those voices lose their power.

Your actions are less oppressive to others. And because you're not wounding yourself or weighing yourself down inside, you find that you have more strength to be generous, wise, and helpful to other people.

So this path we practice here is not a selfish path. It's based on the desire to find true happiness, and true happiness is something that can't harm anybody. If it did harm somebody, it wouldn't be true happiness.

You're really looking very carefully for how you're going to give rise to happiness in your life. These practices of generosity, virtue, and meditation are among the few types of happiness that really are harmless all around.

So breathe in a way that feels soothing, if you need soothing; energizing if you need energy; relaxing if you need some tension unwound or disentangled. You're not the only one who benefits. You're learning how to fabricate your experience of the present moment in a skillful way. This inner fabrication then becomes a foundation for the way you act in the world outside as well. It's a benefit that spreads from right here and radiates out in all directions.

This is why it's important that you maintain your center right here as much as you can, not only while you're sitting here with your eyes closed, but also as you get up and go home. Wherever you go when you're dealing with other people, talking with them, listening to them, as you go throughout the day, remember: Your gift to them is creating a good sense of energy inside yourself. You're protecting yourself both from negative energies outside and inside. If you can keep your sense of healthy breath energy filling the body, your awareness filling the body, that's your protection. And you're radiating good energy out into the world around you.

This practice gives benefits all around.