

## *Broaden Your Range of Choices*

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Some of the first steps of breath meditation deal with being aware of that energy of the breath through the whole body and then calming that energy, calming the effect of the breath on the body. In other words, they deal with sensitizing yourself to the energy flows and channels—just the general sense of different energies in the body and how they're interacting as you breathe in, as you breathe out—and giving you some tools to deal with them.

All too often, when strong energies arise in the body, you don't have these tools. The energies feel threatening, and you feel you have to get them out of your system, especially if the energy is associated with anger. You don't like having the feeling of that energy in the body, so you let it out. Like water under pressure, it's got to escape for the pressure to go down. That's how most people deal with the anger. Either that, or they don't let it out at all and just bottle it up until the whole thing explodes—neither of which is a very skillful way of dealing with the energy.

What we're doing right now is learning how to smooth things out, calm them out, and radiate the energy in new ways so that when strong energy arises, it doesn't feel so threatening. You know what to do with it. A lot of people have a problem with a strong sense of overload in the chest. It feels heavy and oppressive, and very quickly that can be interpreted as anger or fear. Then the question is, what do you do with it?

Ajaan Fuang would often recommend that you think of the breath channels in the arms opening up all the way down through the palms of your hands, so the breath can have a wide-open place to spread down the arms and out the palms. That helps to relieve a lot of that sense of imbalance or the pressure of the energy pushing up against something. It also gives you an opportunity to actually look at what brought on that sense of energy. What thinking, what ways of perceiving things sparked the sense of anger? Or if it was just a flow of energy and you decided to identify it as anger, why was that?

There's a lot to learn from these energy flows and getting some sense of them. Especially in our culture, we're not taught much about them. When we're children, they can feel really overwhelming, and many of the ways we have of dealing with the energy are things we came up with back when we were children. So it's good to come back as an adult and look at these things with new eyes, because the real problem, of course, is not the energy; it's how you interpret it and

the kinds of thoughts and perceptions that spark a feeling of imbalance in the body. You want to look into those.

And again, having the skills of the breath—dealing with the breath energy in ways that feels calming—give rise to a sense that the energy can radiate out so that it's not threatening. Sometimes it's just neutral energy, neither good nor bad, but if you tie it up with your anger, it suddenly becomes something really destructive. You want to learn how to cut those ties, so that the energy is one thing and the anger is something else. You can step back both from the energy and the anger, and ask yourself: What bad habits have I developed here? How can I change those habits? What perceptions was I holding in mind?

That's when you get into verbal fabrication and mental fabrication: the way you talk to yourself, and then the perceptions and feelings you use to spark things. There may be a perception that you're a victim, or that you're being hemmed in by life, or that people don't appreciate you. There are all kinds of perceptions that we carry around, and they become the unquestioned raw material from which we start talking to ourselves.

The difference between perception on the one hand, and thinking and evaluation on the other, is like the difference between words and the sentences made up out of those words. It's as if your lizard brain is sending the words to the rest of your mind, and then the rest of your mind uses them to create a dialogue, or a conversation or chaos—depending on the quality of the thinking. But you have to learn how to question those perceptions.

One of the reasons why the Buddha gives such vivid analogies in the Canon is to provide you with a new range of perceptions to use. Like that perception that you're coming across a desert—hot, trembling with thirst—and you see a little bit of water in a cow's footprint. He said that's what you're like when you're angry. The other person may have only a little bit of goodness, but you need that water. If you don't see any goodness in people, you start treating them like ants—you can crush them whenever you want—which, of course, is not good for you, not good for them. You need to focus on their goodness even if it means getting down and slurping up the water out of the footprint. In other words, look for the goodness in people who, otherwise, you find really hard to deal with because there's a part of the mind that says, "Well, they're so awful. Why should I go to the indignity of looking for any goodness in them?" Well, you need it. We're all living in a desert.

The other day, going to Death Valley, really drove home the image of how inhospitable a desert can be—nothing but rock. The water's poisonous, so you're lucky if you get a little bit of good water. A lot of the world is that way. People

you're dealing with are going to be unfair. There's not that much nourishment out there, so you look for what nourishment you can find.

And remind yourself: You're not the victim. There are choices you can make. This is a really important principle in the practice, realizing that you can choose how you're going to deal with things. You don't have to give in to your own impulses. When the Buddha would start out his teachings, well before he'd talk about the four noble truths, the very first thing he talked about was generosity.

He had a strong etiquette around that. He wouldn't talk about generosity in hopes of making people generous. The reason why generosity has gotten such a bad name in a lot of American Buddhist circles is that you don't hear about generosity until the end of the retreat, when they want your money. You don't hear about giving to monks or nuns, except as an example of why you should now be giving to lay teachers. When they talk about the old tradition of giving to monks and nuns, they don't want you to give you to monks and nuns; they want you to give to them. When you encounter this, it gives generosity a bad name.

But for the Buddha, generosity was a really important principle to begin with, because one of the first things you realize about generosity is that you're got choices. You have something of value, and you can either consume it yourself or you can give it to others. And it has to be one or the other. You can't consume it and give it at the same time, because what's the nature of consumption? Look at food. You eat food, and what happens to it? You get some nourishment out of it, and all you have left to give others is your excrement, which is not something they want to take. So you have the choice of giving it before you consume it, or you just consume it and that's it. Which do you want? You've got the choice.

You begin to realize that one choice is better than the other. The idea that everything is non-dual in the world, or that the teaching is all about is not making distinctions: It's nothing the Buddha taught. He said you want to be very careful about making distinctions. When is it best to be generous, and when do you have to use something yourself? You don't give to the point where it hurts. You don't give in a way that causes you to suffer. But when you look at the things you have, the time you have, the energy you have, you realize you have more than enough. It's good to reflect on that. Whatever you have in excess, you can give away, and you gain something better in return. There's an advantage.

Giving is a trade that teaches you to use your discernment by making distinctions and seeing that you have choices. As you start thinking about being generous, it opens up your mind to other choices you have as well: the choice to observe precepts or not; the choice to meditate or not; the choice to train your mind or not; the choice to hold on to certain ways of behaving; or the choice to

change your ways. These are all distinctions, and there are gradations. There's better and worse, the better being that it leads to greater happiness. The worse means that it leads to greater suffering. These are important distinctions you want to make. In making the distinctions, you begin to see the wide ranges of choices you have and where some of the choices you've been making are really unskillful.

The more skill you have in being generous and the more skill you have in being virtuous, then the more you realize you've got lots of choices. Sometimes your choices force you into difficult situations, but that's where you can develop your discernment. For example, if you make up your mind you're not going to lie, there are certain things you don't want to talk about. So you have to look into why you don't want to talk about them. Sometimes it's actually out of a compassionate motive, in which case, when you can't lie, what are you going to do? It makes you think.

Once you develop these qualities through making these choices, then it goes into your meditation. You're here breathing. Look into the choices you've got. There are different ways you can breathe. There are different ways you can relate to the breath, different ways you can relate to the breath energy in the body, different ways you can understand it. The wider the range of choices you see, the more skillful you can be in any situation.

This is why one of the cures for dealing with difficult emotions is going back and learning to be generous. If you don't have a lot of material things to be generous with, you can be generous with your time. Learn to be generous with your knowledge, generous with your energy.

Ajaan Fuang would sometimes have some students who really weren't ready to meditate, so he'd have them work around the monastery—do things; be helpful. The time spent in being helpful gets you out of yourself and also gives you a sense of self-esteem. In other words, it gets you out of your old unskillful ways of thinking about yourself and gives you new ways of behaving that you can observe and say, "Oh, I can do this, too. I can be that kind of person, too." That's really helpful in the meditation.

So whenever any problems come up in your life or in your meditation, turn around and look at the quality of your generosity. See in which ways it can be improved. As Luang Puu Dune used to say, the practice of the Dhamma is one thing clear through. It's all a practice of giving: the skills of giving, the choices of giving. There are lots and lots of lessons you can learn that way, all the way through the meditation, where you're giving up certain old ways of thinking and hanging on, because you've learned right from the very beginning that you've got choices. Sometimes, the better choice is counter-intuitive. When you're a little

child, the idea of giving something up as being a cause of happiness is very counter-intuitive. But when you've learned from practice that it really does work, you've learned an important lesson. Apply that lesson to your meditation as well.

That's how the practice is one thing clear through: It's generosity clear through. The skills you develop around the choices you see—and the choices you learn to see—get more and more refined to the point where you can, as one of the monks said, trade what ages for what doesn't age; trade what burns for the unbound. It's all learning about how to make skillful trades.