

Indulge in the Pleasure of Jhana

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Focusing on the breath; evaluating the breath so that you get on good terms with it: Ajaan Lee calls this concentration work. And there is work involved. You have to figure out how to get your mind to stay with the breath, exactly what to do with the breath. How do you adjust the breath in a way that's comfortable, that *allows* it to be comfortable? It's possible to squeeze it and stretch it and do all kinds of things that actually make it miserable.

But how do you adjust it in a way that makes it better, so that the mind can permeate into the breath, the breath can permeate into the mind, so that there's no sense of a boundary between the two of them? In other words, your body is willing to have you be aware of it and it's not going to freeze up when you focus your awareness on it, and your mind is willing to let the body come in. It's willing to be very, very sensitive to it. Some people find that it's easier to do this, and others find that it's hard. But whether it's easy or hard is not the matter. It's something you've got to do if you want the mind to settle down in a way that's solid and secure. So if it's hard, try to figure out: Why is it hard?

After all, it is your body and it is your breath. The breath is the force of life. It's what keeps everything going together here. You can do without food for a while. You can do without sleep for a while. But you can't go very long without breathing. Because the breath is the force that keeps the body here all together and functioning, it should be comfortable. It should be easy. If it's not, ask yourself what's getting in the way.

Ask yourself which parts of the body are hungry for breath energy. What can you do to give them energy? How do you recognize that hunger? You experiment. Take some good long deep in-and-out breaths. Allow the whole torso to be ventilated by the breath, nourished by the breath. See if you can notice which parts suddenly feel like they're getting a special jolt of nourishment they didn't have before. That should give you a lesson on something that's missing from your ordinary way of breathing. Then feed that part of the body as much as it wants. After a while, it'll have enough. Then check around and see if there's anything else that seems to be starved.

The main areas that get starved are those around the heart and around the throat. Those are the central areas of the breath. In Thai they actually make a phrase out of them, *cai khaw*: "Your heart and your throat," which is related to your mood. This is where your emotions are often most felt in the body. You may

find some strong emotions coming up as you explore this part. If you do, allow the breath to dissolve them away. You don't have to get involved. You're here to nourish these parts of the body. Let everything else go. We're aiming at a good, strong sense of well-being, pleasure, bliss, rapture. The word in Pali is *sukha*. It has a very wide range of meanings, everything from just plain old ease to very strong bliss. The more you can appreciate it—or, as the Buddha says, settle in and indulge in the pleasure of the concentration—the more you'll be able to get out of it.

I don't know how many times I've seen books on meditation that, when they start mentioning jhana, or concentration, warn you right off the bat of its dangers: "Watch out! You're going to get stuck. You want to get past it so you can get onto insight," they say. The Buddha never said that. He said that if you don't have this kind of pleasure to tap into, there's no way you're going to be able to get past your attachment to sensuality. No matter how much you see the drawbacks of sensuality, you keep coming back, coming back for more, because the mind needs pleasure. It feeds off of pleasure. If it doesn't get pleasure from the breath or the meditation, it's going to go looking in the garbage. It's going to go dumpster diving—anyplace where it can find just a little bit of pleasure, its little hit.

The thing is: All too often, as a result, they don't get much pleasure out of the breath. So you've got to become a real connoisseur. Try to be as sensitive as possible to what the sensitive parts of your body get, mostly in the throat and the heart. Other people may find they have other areas. But these are the parts that really need to be nourished. You can breathe energy through them, but if it's not just right, they get very picky and they freeze up. So try to get to know what they want. Try to figure them out, as in the Buddha's example of the cook.

The cook works for a king or a king's minister. The minister doesn't say, "I like this" or "I like that." It's up to the cook to observe, "What does the king like? What does the king's minister like? What does he reach for?" Then, if you're the cook, you get a sense, "Okay, this is the kind of food he likes," and you make more of that. Don't just think that you're going to move in and impose your ideas of what's going to be comfortable in the body.

You have to learn how to listen to the body; see how it responds. When the breath is heavy, there are some kinds of heavy breathing that can feel really nourishing and very satisfying. Other times, they feel gross. So what does your body need right now? When you find something that feels really good, stick with it until it doesn't feel good anymore. That may be a long time.

You may be afraid, "Are you going to get stuck on the concentration?" Actually, it's nothing to be afraid of. If you're not stuck on the concentration, there's no way you're going to be able to do it well. There's healthy attachment to

concentration and unhealthy. The unhealthy is when you want to go off and don't want to see anybody and don't want to deal with the human race anymore—forgetting, of course, that you're a member of the human race. A lot of the issues that you're running away from are things that actually have to be dealt with. But a healthy attachment to the concentration is when you want to stick with it as you're working through the day; you want to stick with it as you're dealing with people; you want to stick with it whatever comes up, whatever your duties are, whatever your responsibilities, whatever your activities. You try to bring this sense of really being nourished along with you in all that you do.

Once you've found your sensitive spot—the spot that's very picky but really responds well when the breath is feeling good—try to stay there as you go through the day. If you're doing walking meditation, make that your center. Try to be really sensitive to that spot. This means you can carry a sense of well-being into every place you go, everywhere you go, every activity you get engaged in. It's free and nobody has to know about it.

As Ajaan Lee once said, “The things that nobody else knows about: Those are the things that are safe.” It's just a matter of your doing the work, trying to get sensitive to what the body needs, what your mind needs as you're sitting here, so that you can really settle in the body, you can really settle into the breath. You can indulge in this sense of well-being, rapture, pleasure, bliss. If you find that parts of the body or parts of the mind are resistant, okay, ask, “What's putting up the resistance?” Don't push things too hard. Just pose that question. Then work around whatever the resistance is.

Some parts of the body and the mind take a while to respond. They don't trust you. They don't trust each other. They feel threatened by each other. But if you can be patient, it's like training a wild animal. You have to be very, very patient and very indirect. But ultimately, it pays off. The big ice dam in your heart will suddenly melt. You'll realize that the breath can really be very satisfying, very gratifying. You can tap into it whenever you need it so that when you're tempted to go back to dumpster diving for your pleasures, you say, “I've got this. This is so much better. Why bother?” Sometimes, with the old pleasures, it's just out of force of habit.

The mind has built up stories about the old pleasures, but you have to learn how to question those stories. To what extent have those pleasures really given you satisfaction? And where are they now? As for the pleasure of the breath, once you can tap into it, once you can appreciate it, once you cultivate it, it's here all the time. It doesn't have the drawbacks of the sensual pleasures that we tend to run around and make fools of ourselves over.

So find your sensitive spots and be sensitive to them so that they can tap into strong energy when they need it, gentle energy when they want it. The more attention you give to this, the greater the rewards are going to be. This becomes the pleasure that's your food as you go along the path. It gives you the strength to keep on going.