

## *Messaging Your Mind*

*January 19, 2019*

To settle down with the breath involves two activities. One is to focus on the sensation of breathing in and of itself. In other words, you're not going to think about the breath in relationship to anything else at all, just the breath feels as it comes in, how it feels as it goes out.

The second activity is to put aside any interest in the world outside. No matter how wonderful your thoughts may be—interesting, insightful about the world—they're not wanted right now.

And you've got to get the message for both of these activities to everybody in the mind, because the mind is like a huge crowd of people, with lots of ideas, lots of chatter. Especially if you've just come to the monastery, there's probably a lot of chatter about what you saw before you got here, and where you're going to go back to when you leave. That simply gets in the way of being with the breath right now. You want to get everybody in sync and you've got to get the message across.

Now, when the mind sends messages to itself, it uses two things. One, the Buddha calls directed thought and evaluation. In other words, you direct your thoughts to something and you make comments on it. It's basically the way you talk to yourself. The other way is through perceptions. Perceptions are either individual words or images. They're the quick way of getting a message across: the mind's instant messaging. And these messages can be pretty powerful: Even just one word, just one image, can change everything in the mind.

So any images of the world, you want to put aside. Any conversations about the world, you want to put aside. Replace them with images about how the world is something you really don't want to get involved with. That's why we had that chant just now: "The world is swept away. It does not endure." Whatever you could be looking for in the world outside, ultimately it's going to get swept away. Whatever you might lay claim to in the world outside, ultimately it's going to be taken. Whatever you might say is yours out there is going to be turning into something that's not yours someday. So if you're looking for anything really good to hang on to, it's not out there. It's going to be in here, in the mind.

So use some of these perceptions, use some of these comments to wean yourself off of your interest for the world, at least for the time being. You're not expected to say, "I'm never going to go back." All you're asked is to clear some space in the mind right now so you can be with the breath and get the mind to settle down. Because a mind, in order to be well trained, has to settle down. If it's

going to see itself clearly, to understand itself, it has to be here consistently and with enough stillness so that it can notice things going on that it didn't see before. After all, everything you need to know in order to put an end to suffering is happening right here. It's simply that you're missing some of the things that are happening right here. So you've got to get the mind quiet.

When you've cleared away your interest with the world, then you can turn to the breath. And here again, you use perceptions along with directed thought and evaluation. You want a perception of the breath that allows you to settle down and have a sense of ease in the breathing. And eventually, the Buddha says, you want to be able to take that sense of ease and spread it through the body. So, to think of the breath as something that fills the body and can act as a vehicle for that ease to spread through the body is a very useful perception.

Ajaan Lee talks about breath as being not just the air coming in and out of the lungs, but also the movement of energy in the blood vessels and the nerves, out to every pore of the skin. So when you breathe in, think of the whole body breathing in. And ask yourself, "What kind of breathing feels good for the whole body?" That involves not only adjusting the rhythm of the breathing, but also thinking of where in the body there's a sense of being blocked, a sense of tension that would prevent breath energy from flowing. If you can detect any tension like that, allow it to relax.

You might make a survey, starting with the head going down the back, out the legs to the tips of the toes. Then starting again at the head again, now going through the shoulders, the arms, down to the tips of the fingers, going through the torso in front and back, to see if there's any tension that would get in the way of the breath energy flowing. Ask yourself, "When you breathe in, where does it feel like the energy's coming in?" Here again, Ajaan Lee talks about thinking of it coming in right at the area of the heart or coming in from the back, right at the base of the skull, going down the spine.

Or you could think of the fact that, since the breath is energy, there's not only energy coming in from the outside, but there's also energy originating here in the body. It might be down around the navel; it might be at the breastbone. If there's any pattern of tension in the body that would get in the way of those energies spreading through the body, radiating through the body, relax that tension. If you're not sure if there's tension, compare the right side of your body with your left, the right hand with the left hand, the right wrist with the left wrist, up the arms, starting again with the feet, up the ankles, the shins, the knees, into the torso, into the head. And whichever side seems to be holding more tension, allow that side to relax.

Here you might want to remind yourself that, after all, the breath is the force of life. It only stands to reason that if the force of life feels constricted and tight, it's not going to be good for the body, it's not going to be good for the mind. So you're working on your health here at the same time that you're trying to get the mind to settle down. This gives you one more reason to want to get interested in the breath.

So these are the two ways in which you communicate with yourself. You hold an image of the breath in mind and you talk to yourself about how it's going, asking questions, trying to figure out answers. This gets you interested in the breath, and more and more of the mind gets involved.

If you told yourself, "No thinking, no questioning, just do as you're told," large parts of the mind would rebel. So instead, you're trying to get everybody happy to be here, interested in being here. The more you can get interested in the breath, the more the issues of the world can fade into the background. Or if they do come up into the mind, they have fewer hooks. They don't grab you quite so much.

But as the breath gets comfortable, you've got to watch out. You can't leave the breath for the sense of comfort. Here again, you've got to hold that perception of breath in mind. This, too, is a message the meditating parts of the mind are sending to other parts of the mind.

Stay with the idea of the breath as you're noticing the different sensations in the body. That's going to be the thread that carries you through. If you leave the breath for the sense of comfort, it'll be nice for a while, but you begin to lose focus. In some cases, it's almost like falling asleep—not quite asleep, you're not totally oblivious—but you're not really sure where you are and eventually everything goes away. The concentration gets lost; the stillness gets lost. But if you keep the perception of breath in mind, that this is bodily energy here, you've got something relatively clear for your focus. If the breath itself isn't clear enough, you can add a meditation word. *Buddho* is popular in Thailand. It means awake. That's the title of the Buddha. That's not his name, by the way. It's a title: someone awakened. That quality of being awake is what you're trying to develop here. So think *bud-* with the in breath, *-dho* with the out. But if you find that you can stay with the breath without that aid, all the better, because it's more calming.

At the same time, you can see more subtleties in how the breath feels in different parts of the body. Go down to the spaces between the fingers and the toes. Sometimes you can even sense the breath energy that surrounds the body outside the skin, like a cocoon. But whatever you're sensitive to, that's what you focus on. And maintain your interest—and maintain that conversation in the mind, both the perceptions and the directed thought and evaluation, until

everything feels really good. Your awareness fills the body. The breath feels comfortable throughout the body.

You can then drop the directed thought and evaluation, and just hold onto the perception of breath, just an image or a word, and that'll be enough to carry you through. But again, you've got to hold onto that perception. If you lose it, everything turns into a fog. Sometimes images not related to the breath come up. You don't want them right now. Just breathe deeply into the heart and they'll go away.

Sometimes intense feelings of energy can go through the body. You don't try to stop them, but if you've opened up what are called the breath channels in the body, it makes it easier for them to flow around the body, and if they feel excessive, they can flow out. Two good places to think of their going out would be the palms of your hands and the soles of your feet. If there's too much energy in your head, you can think of it going out the eyes, or down the neck and then out the hands. And here again, it's useful to have an alternative perception.

If the energy gets too strong, remind yourself that there are many layers of energy in the body. So think of the fact that there is a subtler energy level right there in the same spot where there's the gross energy. And if the gross energy feels like it's putting a lot of pressure in different parts of the body, try to find the perception that allows for the idea that the energy's pushing against something—and let it dissolve away. Remember, the body is made out of atoms, and atoms are mainly space. So you can think of the energy going through the space between the atoms or inside the atoms. And the sense of feeling trapped or having a lot of pressure will dissipate. Here again, it's a matter of having useful perceptions to send messages to different parts of the mind. As you do, you begin to become more aware of the perceptions you're holding onto that you didn't really notice. You just took them for granted.

We make so many assumptions about the world, so many assumptions about the body, so many assumptions about the mind that we don't even realize that they're assumptions. We just think, "Well, that's the way things are." A lot of meditation is putting a question mark next to that. Is it really the way things are, or is it just a perception you're holding onto? The Buddha gives you alternative perceptions to use that can change the way you experience your body, change the way you experience your mind.

If pains come up while you're sitting here, again, ask yourself how you're perceiving the pain. If you perceive it as a solid lump, it's going to weigh down the mind. Try to see if you can see it as little bubbles of pain, or little moments of pain coming and going. And then you ask yourself, "When they come, do you think

they're coming at you?" How about if they're going away?—in the same way as if you're going down the road, sitting in the backseat of one of those old station wagons, facing backwards, and as soon as anything comes into your range of vision, it's going away from you. So instead of feeling that you're oppressed by the pain, or attacked by the pain, think of it this way: As soon as you're aware of a moment of pain, it's already going away, it's going away.

And you can ask yourself, "Does the pain have a shape?" If it has a shape, you've given it the shape. Pains don't have shape. In our mind's eye, they have a shape, but then again, that's the mind's eye. That's a perception. How about erasing that perception? Part of the mind will be afraid to do that because it's placed a shape on the pain with the assumption that it can contain the pain that way. But you can't contain pain. All you do is create more tension. So if you can drop that perception, see what happens.

These are some of the things, positive and negative, that may come up in the meditation.

Even with the positive things, you've got to be careful so that you don't get distracted, because you still want to stay with the perception of breath. And make your sensation, or your conception of breath, large enough to convey the idea that there are times that the breath can be still. When the mind is really quiet, the breath doesn't need to come in and go out because the brain is using less oxygen. And if everything feels well connected in the body, whatever energy needs there are in the body, the energy can flow from one part of the body to another without your having to breathe in or breathe out. But it's still breath. It's quiet, like the image on a T.V. screen when there's no channel. There's still light, there's still something coming in from the air, but it's not a specific shape. It's not moving in a particular direction. So there's still energy in the body, but it's not moving. It still counts as breath. Hold on to the perception that this, too, is breath. Otherwise, you lose your focus.

So the perceptions you hold in mind will have a huge impact on getting the mind to settle down, both in getting it to come to the breath to begin with and in then teaching it how to relate to the breath in ways that are more comfortable, more interesting, easier to stay with. As you start peeling away different layers of activity in the mind, hold that perception of breath as an energy that fills the body—and that it can either be moving or still. That perception gives you what you need in order to give the mind a soft landing. In other words, when it settles in here, it feels right, feels at home.

The idea of sitting here not breathing may be scary to some people, but you don't have to stop breathing. In fact, it's best that you don't try to stop breathing.

But it can happen on its own. Once everything is connected and everything is very still, it'll happen. It may take a while to get the sense that this is what it really feels like being at home. But once you can get a sense of being at home here, then you're at the same place where the Buddha was on the night of his awakening. The mind's quiet and still like this, breath energy filling the body very still, the mind, your awareness filling the body. In cases like this, with the activity in the body becoming so quiet, then whatever is going on in the mind becomes a lot clearer.

This then becomes your laboratory for watching the mind, because after all, the big problem in life is that we want happiness, but we do things that cause suffering. Even though we think we're doing things that will lead to happiness, they end up causing suffering all too many times. You want to be able to see that in action so that you can do something about it—getting the mind to settle down, dropping all your other outside interests for the time being, getting really interested in how the mind relates to the breath, how the breath relates to the body, how you can find a sense of satisfaction and interest being right here. That puts you in the right place to see your mind in action.

So try to get everybody in the mind on board. Get the message out there. And, for the time being, the world is far away. The breath is right here and you're fully aware of it. This is where you want to be. Get the perceptions, get your mental chatter all in line with this one purpose. Get the message to all of the mind. And the more you can get everybody on board, the more there'll be a sense that your full awareness is here, it's filling the present moment, and everything seems like it's falling into place where it should be. This is called making a home for the mind, a home where you can be at your ease but also the kind of home where you can work from home, because everything you need to know to understand the mind to put an end to its problems, especially the big problem of why it creates suffering, is all right here. And as you get the mind more still, you can access what you need to know.