

The Right Time at the Right Place

October 8, 2021

You want to observe the mind in the present moment. So, what do you have to keep you anchored here? You've got the breath.

So take a couple of good, long, deep in-and-out breaths. Notice where you feel the breathing in the body, settle your awareness there, and watch it to see if it's comfortable.

If long breathing feels good, keep it up; if not, you can change—make it shorter; or in short, out long; in long, out short; fast, slow; heavy, light; deep, shallow. Ask yourself, “What kind of breathing would feel good now?” You can experiment—try different kinds of breathing—or simply pose that question in the mind and see how the body responds.

If you find a rhythm that feels good, stay with it. Try to maintain it as long as it's comfortable, and, if it becomes uncomfortable, you can change. The needs of the body with regard to the breath will change as the mind begins to settle down, so you have to keep making adjustments.

You can think of that comfortable breath energy spreading through different parts of the body: from the back of the neck down the spine, out the legs; from the middle of the chest down through the stomach and the intestines; down the shoulders, down the arms; all throughout the head.

Think of the breathing as a whole-body process. In the Buddha's analysis, there's breath element throughout the body. You feel it most prominently as you breathe in, breathe out, but it's also there in the blood vessels, in the nerves, going out to the pores of the skin.

Notice where it's obvious, make sure that that's comfortable, and then see how much you can spread that sense of comfort. You don't push it out; you don't squeeze it out. Just let it radiate. This is how you get the mind into right concentration.

Thinking about the breath: That's *vitakka*. Evaluating the breath—how it can be made comfortable and how you can take advantage of that sense of comfort: That's *vicara*. Then simply staying with the breath and nothing else: That's *ekaggatā*. Those are the three cause factors in getting the mind into jhana.

The results will be a sense of ease and pleasure, and a sense of fullness and refreshment. Wherever you sense those feelings of ease, pleasure, fullness, refreshment, allow them to spread around. That's for the mind to stay anchored in

the present moment. It doesn't like to be confined, so the more spacious you can make your concentration, the happier it will be to be here.

We're doing this because right concentration is the heart of the path, and the Buddha defines it in terms of the jhanas.

Back when the forest ajaans were beginning to teach in central Thailand, they came up against a belief that jhana was no longer possible, to say nothing of nibbana. So they had to counteract it. Ajaan Lee's way was interesting: He would teach people how to gain psychic powers from their concentration.

There's the story of a woman who would come and practice meditation with him. Her job at the monastery where he was teaching in Bangkok was to clean the restrooms. When she had some free time, she'd come to sit and meditate with him. She got so that she could read people's minds, and the first people whose minds she read were the monks in the monastery. She got all worked up, realizing the kinds of things they were thinking about—these were not meditating monks—so she went and told on them to the abbot. She went one by one by one down the list of the different monks in the monastery, and he figured she was probably right, so he called the monks together and said, "You guys have got to watch out. These people can read you inside and out."

But, of course, the important part about jhāna is not the psychic powers; it's enabling you to see what's going on in the mind.

The thing about jhana is that you don't think about jhana while you're doing it. Jhana is not the object of jhāna. The breath is the object of the mind, so try to get really interested in it.

One of the reasons we have those chants at the beginning of the meditation—about the parts of the body; sometimes we reflect on aging, illness, and death; sometimes we go through the Dhamma summaries:

The world is swept away.

It does not endure.

It offers no shelter.

There's no one in charge.

It has nothing of its own.

One has to pass on, leaving everything behind.

The world is insufficient,

insatiable,

a slave to craving.

—we reflect on those things to remind ourselves, if we're tempted to leave the breath, "Where are you going? What are you looking for in this world that's so

full of change, instability, insatiability?” You go out there and there’s never enough.

What the Buddha’s promising here is that when you get the mind into right concentration and get in on the right path, you can reach a point of enough, not because you simply tell the mind not to go out, but because there’s something really good that can be found here: a strong sense of well-being. And that’s just on the path. The goal is something even more special.

So, if the mind is tempted to leave the breath right now, where’s it going? What’s it looking for? Why is it looking for trouble? Why is it looking for disappointment? Those questions can turn the mind back around. Come back here again, and do your best to get interested in the breath.

Because here it is, this element in the body. It keeps you alive. It’s the meeting place between the mind and the body. Of the different elements in the body, it’s the most responsive to the mind, and it’s the one that can be used to affect the other elements in the body, too. It’s also the closest to the mind. Without the breath, body and mind would go their separate ways, so it only stands to reason that if you can get the breath energies flowing well in the body, it’s going to be good for the body and for the mind.

It’s healing for the nerves of the various organs. Think about how much you use your eyes especially, now in this age of screens, taking in all kinds of harmful information—things that are designed to give rise to greed, aversion, and delusion. Those nerves need to be rested. They need to be soothed. So here you have the chance to close your eyes, soothe those nerves, soothe all the different organs in the body. Think of the breath as a gentle massage for the different parts of the body.

In other words, get here inside the body. Think of yourself as *wearing* the breath. The breath is all around you; you’re centered here inside.

Our problem is that we keep sending the mind out. You look at an object and the mind is out *at* the object; you listen to something, your mind is out at the object you’re listening to. Here, we’re trying to bring everything back inside to where it belongs, where it can gather its strength, where it can gather its sense of well-being and learn how to observe itself out of that well-being.

The stillness is what allows you to see subtle movements in the mind. The sense of well-being is what allows you to admit things that you ordinarily wouldn’t admit about yourself.

Just think about the Buddha’s analysis of suffering: It’s from the things we crave and cling to. In other words, we suffer because of the things we like, that we feel that we can’t let go of. That’s because we’re ignorant about what we’re doing,

and that ignorance is something we don't want to look at. We project things outside, saying that the problem is outside with other people, other things. That's because if we start looking inside, we start feeling threatened.

But if you're coming with a sense of well-being—a sense of really belonging here, so that you have a sense of awareness that's not necessarily tied down to a lot of its other attachments—then you can look at those attachments and realize they're pretty dumb. You knew better but you went for them anyhow. But now you've got something better to hold on to.

This, too, is an image that you see throughout the forest tradition. Ajaan MahaBoowa's is of climbing a ladder: You hold on to one rung and then, with the other hand, you hold on to the higher rung and, only when you've got your hand firmly on that higher rung, do you let the lower hand go, and reach up to a higher rung. In that way, by holding on, holding on, letting go, holding on, letting go, you finally get to the roof. Then you can get off the ladder entirely. If you let go with both hands while you're on the ladder, you're going to fall.

Ajaan Fuang's image was of a rocket: Send a rocket to the moon, and first you have to hold on to the booster. Then you let go of the booster, and then you hold on to the second-stage booster, and you let go of that.

In other words, to let go, first you have to hold on to the right things and in the right way. That's what we're doing as we get the mind into concentration. It provides a good basis for our discernment, not only because it's quiet, with a sense of well-being, but also because, to get the mind to settle down like this, you're going to have to get to know the mind.

Right here in the state of concentration, you've got the form of the body, you've got feelings of pleasure, you've got the perception that holds you here, you've got the fabrications of directed thought and evaluation that are your internal analysis—your internal conversation on how to get the mind and the breath together well—and then there's consciousness: your awareness of all these things. That's all five aggregates right here. You're getting hands-on experience with them as you shape them into a state of concentration.

Instead of carrying them around on your shoulders, you're making them your path. It's like a sack full of bricks: If you carry it around, it's going to be heavy; if you take the bricks out of the sack, put them down neatly on the ground, they become your pavement.

So try to get the mind into right concentration. Focus on the breath. Don't worry about concentration or jhana or those other concepts. Just get really snug with the breath—alert, still, with a sense of strong well-being. Let that provide the foundation for all the remaining stories you want to build in this house of the

practice—this place where the mind can dwell with a strong sense of belonging here and of being in the right place, here at the right time: right now.