

## Joy of Meditation Part Two

### **Meditation practice doesn't save all its pleasure for the end. You can enjoy it now.**

Thanissaro Bhikkhu

The primary technique the Buddha taught his son was breath meditation. The Buddha recommended sixteen steps in dealing with the breath [see bottom of page]. The first two involve straightforward instructions; the rest raise questions to be explored. In this way, the breath becomes a vehicle for exercising your ingenuity in solving the problems of the mind, and exercising your sensitivity in gauging the results.

To begin, simply notice when the breath is long and when it's short. In the remaining steps, though, you train yourself. In other words, you have to figure out for yourself how to do what the Buddha recommends. The first two trainings are to breathe in and out sensitive to the entire body, then to calm the effect that the breath has on the body. How do you do that? You experiment. What rhythm of breathing, what way of conceiving the breath calms its effect on the body? Try thinking of the breath not as the air coming in and out of the lungs but as the energy flow throughout the body that draws the air in and out. Where do you feel that energy flow? Think of it as flowing in and out the back of your neck, in your feet and hands, along the nerves and blood vessels, in your bones. Think of it coming in and out every pore of your skin. Where is it blocked? How do you dissolve the blockages? By breathing through them? Around them? Straight into them? See what works.

As you play around with the breath in this way, you'll make some mistakes—I've sometimes given myself a headache by forcing the breath too much—but with the right attitude the mistakes become a way to learn how your perceptions shape the way you breathe. You'll also catch yourself getting impatient or frustrated, but then you'll see that when you breathe through these emotions, they go away. You're beginning to see the impact of the breath on the mind.

The next step is to breathe in and out with a sense of refreshing fullness and a sense of ease. Here, too, you'll need to experiment both with the way you breathe and with the way you conceive of the breath. Notice how these feelings and conceptions have an impact on the mind and how you can calm that impact so the mind feels most at ease.

Then, when the breath is calm and you've been refreshed by feelings of ease and stillness, you're ready to look at the mind itself. You don't leave the breath, though. You adjust your attention slightly so that you're watching the mind as it stays with the breath. Here the Buddha recommends three areas for experimentation: Notice how to gladden the mind when it needs gladdening, how to steady it when it needs steadying, and how to release it from its attachments and burdens when it's ready for release.

Sometimes the gladdening and steadying will require bringing in other topics for contemplation. For instance, to gladden the mind, you can develop an attitude of infinite goodwill or recollect the times in the past when you've been virtuous or generous. To steady the mind when it's been knocked over by lust or to reestablish your focus when you're drowsy or complacent, you can contemplate death, realizing that death could come at any time and you need to prepare your mind if you're going to face it with any finesse. At other times, you can gladden or steady the mind simply by the way you focus on the breath itself. For instance, breathing down into your hands and feet can really anchor the mind when its concentration has become shaky. When one spot in the body isn't enough to hold your interest, try focusing on the breath in two spots at once.

The important point is that you've now put yourself in a position where you can experiment with the mind and read the results of your experiments with greater and greater accuracy. You can try exploring these skills off the cushion as well: How do you gladden the mind when you're sick? How do you steady the mind when dealing with a difficult person?

---

As for releasing the mind from its burdens, you prepare for the ultimate freedom of nirvana first by releasing the mind from any awkwardness in its concentration. Once the mind has settled down, check to see if there are any ways you can refine the stillness. For instance, in the beginning stages of concentration you need to keep directing your thoughts to the breath, evaluating and adjusting it to make it more agreeable. But eventually the mind grows so still that evaluating the breath is no longer necessary. So you figure out how to make the mind one with the breath, and in that way you release the mind into a more intense and refreshing state of ease.

As you expand your skills in this way, the intentions that you've been using to shape your experience of body and mind become more and more transparent. At this point, the Buddha suggests revisiting the theme of inconstancy, learning to look for it in the effects of every intention. You see that even the best states produced by skillful intentions—the most solid and refined states of concentration—waver and change. Realizing this induces a sense of disenchantment with and dispassion for all intentions. You see that the only way to get beyond this changeability is to allow all intentions to cease. You watch as everything is relinquished, including the path. What's left is unconditioned: the deathless. Your desire to explore the breath has taken you beyond desiring, beyond the breath, all the way to nirvana.

But the path doesn't save all its pleasures for the end. It takes the daunting prospect of reaching full awakening and breaks it down into manageable interim goals—a series of intriguing challenges that, as you meet them, allow you to see progress in your practice. This in and of itself makes the practice interesting and a source of joy.

At the same time, you're not engaged in busywork. You're developing a sensitivity to cause and effect that helps make body and mind transparent. Only when they're fully transparent can you let them go. In experiencing the full body of the breath in meditation, you're sensitizing yourself to the area of your awareness in which the deathless—when you're acute enough to see it—will appear.

So even though the path requires effort, it's an effort that keeps opening up new possibilities for

happiness and well-being in the present moment. And even though the steps of breath meditation eventually lead to a sense of disenchantment and dispassion, they don't do so in a joyless way. The Buddha never asks anyone to adopt a world-negating—or world-affirming, for that matter—frame of mind. Instead, he asks for a “world-exploring” attitude, in which you use the inner world of full-body breathing as a laboratory for exploring the harmless pleasures the world as a whole can provide when the mind is steady and clear. You learn skills to calm the body, to develop feelings of refreshment, fullness, and ease. You learn how to calm the mind, to steady it, gladden it, and release it from its burdens.

Only when you run up against the limits of these skills are you ready to drop them, to explore what greater potential for happiness there may be. In this way, disenchantment develops not from a narrow or pessimistic attitude but from an attitude of hope that there must be something better. This is like the disenchantment a child senses when he or she has mastered a simple game and feels ready for something more challenging. It's the attitude of a person who has matured. And as we all know, you don't mature by shrinking from the world, watching it passively or demanding that it entertain you. You mature by exploring it, by expanding your range of usable skills through play.