

Breath Meditation: The Third Tetrad

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One of the hardest but also one of the most necessary parts of developing meditation as a skill is, at the end of each session, to reflect on at what point in the session the mind was most settled, with the greatest sense of ease; when it was quietest, the most alert, so that you can remember to try to recreate those conditions the next time around. This is hard because we often don't know what to look for. We just think, "That was a really nice state of mind." Then we try to clone it, but it doesn't work, and so we get frustrated. And that leads us to think that, well, maybe the desire to have that state of mind is a bad thing, and we try not to have any desires—but that gets in the way of developing the meditation as a skill.

It's not bad to have that desire. It's part of the desire for right effort. The key to the solution lies, one, in knowing what to look for to begin with; and then, two, when you find that your mind in the next meditation session is not where you want it, getting a sense of what's lacking and how you can make up the lack in order to get the mind where you do want it to go.

One of the most useful sets of instructions for dealing with this problem lies in the third tetrad in the Buddha's instructions on breath meditation, which builds on the first two tetrads. Remember the first tetrad. You're focused on the body, being sensitive to the breath, sensitive to the whole body as you breathe in and breathe out, and then you calm the process of bodily fabrication, i.e., you gain some rapture and then calm the effect that the breath has on the body so that it gives rise to a sense of ease and well-being. In the second tetrad, you're sensitizing yourself to that sense of rapture and the sense of well-being, and to the perceptions that maintain them. Then you notice how those feelings and perceptions have an impact on the mind. Then you try to calm that impact so that the mind grows more solid and still.

Those two tetrads give you the background for dealing with the third tetrad, which is being sensitive to the state of your mind. It starts with that instruction: Breathe in sensitive to the mind. Breathe out sensitive to the mind. Where's your mind right now? What state is it in? Can you compare it to where it's been before? Can you tell whether it's irritable? Can you tell whether it's sluggish? Can you tell whether it's flighty? If you can, that gives you an idea of which direction you need to go.

The remaining three steps in the tetrad give three alternatives on how to get the mind back in the right place.

The first is gladdening the mind when it's sluggish or depressed. Remember: What are the things that fabricate your state of mind? Feelings and perceptions. Where do feelings come from? You get some feelings from the way you breathe and pay attention to the breath. So if you find that the mind is feeling sluggish, depressed, or discouraged, what can you do to gladden it by the way you breathe to create good feelings and by the perceptions you hold in mind? In some cases, these perceptions might be dealing with the breath. In others, you may have to take a little time off from the breath and think of another theme that gives you encouragement. Think about the Buddha, the Dhamma, or the Sangha. You can think about your past virtue, your past generosity, things that you find uplifting. Then you can come back to the breath, but this time with a better state of mind.

If, however, the mind is feeling overly excited, overly energetic, then you want to figure out how to breathe in a way that steadies the mind. And again, this might have to do with just the way you breathe, or with the perceptions you hold about the breath. Or you may have to deal with some other topic. Death is a really good one for steadying the mind. Death could come at any time and it could cut short all kinds of things in your life.

I was reading the other day someone commenting on how if you see aging, illness, and death as dangerous, it's a sign that you're attached, whereas instead you should just see aging, illness, and death as simply a part of this wonderful life we have, so you have to embrace it all. That's not a Buddhist teaching. The Buddha says you've got to see danger in death, that it's going to cut things off very quickly. It could happen at any time. A little clot

of blood could get the wanderlust, start wandering around your system, and then get lodged someplace in the heart or in the brain, and that's it. You don't have time to say goodbye to anybody. You don't have any time to give any last-minute instructions or requests. You're just out. And you have no idea where you're going.

And, unless the mind has been really well trained, you have no idea how you're going to react at that point, whether you can trust the mind to make the right choices. If you can't trust the mind to sit here, meditate for an hour, and settle down, it's going to be really hard to trust it when an event like that occurs. So thinking about death gets you more focused on what you've got to do right now, which is to get your mind in shape. That can help to steady the mind.

So again, you're using the breath, you're using feelings, and you're using perceptions to get the mind into the shape that you want. Over time you get a sense of what works in lifting your level of energy; what works in calming it down.

The Buddha talks about using the factors for awakening to lift up the mind and to calm it down. The ones that lift you up are persistence, rapture, and analysis of qualities—i.e., when you try to figure things out in the mind. For example, if your mind is sitting here getting kind of sluggish, you give it work to do, to figure out something. What's going on? Is the breath getting to the right places right now? Which parts of the body are lacking in breath energy? How can you make up for that? In other words, you pose questions. And then you act on the answers you think up. If you act on them well and get good results, then there will be a sense of rapture. Those are the energizing factors for awakening.

The calming factors are calm, concentration, and equanimity. When the mind is antsy, ask yourself: What kinds of fabrications will calm you down? Where is, as the Buddha says, the potential for calm right now? Where is the potential for solidity in the mind right now? Where is the potential for equanimity? Ferret those things out and you'll find the mind gets a lot steadier.

The last step in this third tetrad is releasing the mind. Basically, this has to do with the mind's burdens. There are things holding the mind down or holding it back. And release from these burdens can be of two basic sorts: temporary release and total release. Temporary release is when the mind has been burdened down with thoughts of work or thoughts of school, thoughts of responsibilities at home, and you can get the mind—for the duration of your concentration—out from under those things.

We talked today about developing a perception of wilderness. When you stand on the edge of the Grand Canyon, a lot of your concerns at home and at work seem very, very small. Even though we're not here at the edge of the Grand Canyon, we are sitting under this enormous sky. It's good to go out sometimes at night and just look up at the sky, to get a sense of how enormous it is, how immense it is, and how small a lot of your problems are. That can uplift the mind and lift some of its burdens for a while.

Or you might be burdened with thoughts of sensual desires. Are they preventing you from getting into concentration? Then they're a burden. As the Buddha himself said, when he was beginning to practice he knew that he should put sensuality aside, but his mind was still resistant. The solution was to look at the drawbacks of sensuality and the advantages of getting past it.

This is why we have the contemplation of the parts of the body, of the aging of the body, and of all the illnesses the body is subject to. As you pursue these contemplations properly, you come to realize that the problem is not so much the objects for which you have desires, it's your fascination with the resolves that hunger for those objects. That's where the real problem is. So you want to look at the drawbacks of those resolves, what they do to the mind. When you can see that they put you in a state that you don't really want to be in, then it's a lot easier to get past them.

This is one of the reasons why Ajaan Lee recommends the reflections that give rise to a sense of samvega at the beginning of meditation, so you can think through some of the issues that might come up in the meditation and view them from an angle that reminds you: If you don't get the mind trained, you just keep coming back, coming back, a slave to

craving. Like King Koravya: Here he is, 80 years old, and yet he's still wanting to conquer all the lands in all the directions around him, even lands on the other side of the ocean. All for what? A lot of killing, a lot of mayhem, and then he dies. And even though we may not want to engage in killing and mayhem, our lives do involve a lot of struggle. For what? For a few sensual pleasures? Then we're gone.

When you think about that, it gives you a greater sense of samvega that makes it a lot easier to get past sensuality, so that the mind is willing to settle down and just be with the breath, instead of being constantly disturbed by thoughts of going back to sensual pleasures. That's the point where mindfulness of breathing gets you into the first jhana. From there, you can go to the higher jhanas by looking for the things that are burdening the mind within the lower jhanas, and learning how to release yourself from them.

At first, don't be too quick to try to analyze the state of concentration when you get into it. Just see what you can do to keep it going. Then, as you get more and more proficient at keeping it going, you can begin to notice: "What in here is still an unnecessary burden? How can I stay concentrated, but with less effort? How can I do it more efficiently?" When you've worked through all the wrinkles of the breath, you can settle down without having to think about these things. You don't have to do any directed thought or evaluation. Just be one with the breath. That releases the mind from the need to do directed thought and evaluation.

There will still be a sense of rapture there, but then after a while the rapture becomes tedious. It's like food. When you're really hungry, you want as much food as possible, but after you're well-fed, food doesn't seem so attractive any more. In the same way, when the body's really tired, you want as much rapture as possible. But then there comes a point when the body's needs are met; the mind's needs are met. That's when the rapture becomes tedious. It's like having too much food. You don't want to eat anymore. So you can stop feeding on it.

Tune the mind into a more refined level of the breath, get it beneath the radar, and you can release the mind from the rapture. And so on down through the various levels of jhana.

The same principle applies to total release. You look for any rise or fall in the level of stress in the mind, and ask yourself, "What am I doing when the level of stress rises? What am I doing when it falls?" When you see that you're doing something together with the rise in the stress, and you've had enough of the stress, you let that "something" go.

Basically, it comes back to the principle the Buddha taught Rahula. This is the best way of dealing with delusion. You're not really sure whether you know something, or you may think you're sure you know something but you haven't yet put it into action to test it. So you have to test it. On the outside level, as the Buddha said, when you're going to do something, you ask yourself, "Is this going to harm anybody?" If you think it's not going to do any harm to anybody, you can go ahead and do it. But while you're doing it, look for the results that are coming up. If any unexpected harm comes up, then you stop what you're doing. If you see no harm coming from what you're doing, then you continue with the action until it's done. When it's done, you look at the long-term results. If you see that they're not what you expected, okay, you've learned something. You've seen through some of your delusion.

The same principle applies here with the actions of the mind. You try things out. You thought you knew what went into a good mind state before. When you try it out, then if it doesn't work, you go back and check it again—because these things are fabricated. Our problem is that we're not fully aware of how we fabricate things. But with time, you get more and more sensitive. It's a matter of trial and error, and then learning how to pose questions and to ask yourself, "Okay, what is it that I'm missing?" or "What went into this mind state?" "In terms of bodily fabrication, mental fabrication, what's missing here that I didn't see?" And over time you get better. You develop a skill. This principle can take you all the way to total release.

So always remember that states of the mind are fabricated. You've been putting them together for who knows how long, simply that you're ignorant of how you do it. The Buddha's instructions on breath meditation in the first three tetrads give you some handles

on how to figure out, “Okay, what am I doing as I create a state of mind and how can I do it better?” You focus on the issues of the way you breathe, the perceptions you hold in mind, the feelings that these things give rise to. Those are three big things you want to watch; the three big things you want to look for as you try to get more and more in control of the mind—so that, as the Buddha said, you get the mind to the point where if there’s something you need to think about, the mind will think about it. If you don’t want to think, it’ll stop. And that way, you can live with your mind a lot more easily because you understand it a lot more thoroughly.