

Breath Teaches the Bramaviharas

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Focus on the breath. Take a couple of good long deep in-and-out breaths first, to highlight your sense of the body as you feel it from within. And if long breathing feels good, keep it up. If it doesn't, you're free to change. Try shorter breathing, or in short, out long; in long, out short; fast, slow; heavy, light; deep, shallow. Try to get sensitive to what the body really needs right now. In this way, you're showing goodwill for yourself, of course, and it spreads out to others. If you can create a sense of well-being, a sense of being centered inside, people will find you a lot better person to be around. So as we work on showing goodwill to ourselves in this way, we're learning some important lessons about goodwill, and, in fact, all of the brahmaviharas in general.

One of the first lessons is that happiness doesn't have to be a zero-sum game. There are so many areas out in the world where it's just that. One person gains, another person has to lose. But here it's gaining all around. When you're more centered inside, other people are less subject to your greed, aversion, and delusion. When you're more solid inside, people can rely on you more.

At the same time, you begin to realize there are opportunities for well-being that you may not have thought of before. For me, Ajaan Lee's method of breath meditation was very different from other breath meditation methods I'd learned up to that point. With the other ones, one, you weren't supposed to play with the breath. The teachers would say to stick with whatever the breath was doing on its own, as if the breath was acting on its own, and they said nothing about breath energies in the body. But Ajaan Lee's teachings on both of those points opened up lots of worlds of possibilities and changed my mind about what well-being could be.

So you'll find, as you begin to explore potentials for well-being inside, that this type of meditation teaches you lessons about potentials for well-being that you may have never thought of before. And it encourages you to look for them outside as well. There are lots of areas where there are possibilities for well-being in your life, both for yourself and for others. The problem is that you simply overlook them. There are opportunities for generosity. There are opportunities for being careful, sensitive to the needs and well-being of other people, if you simply look for them. It's good to have some guidance in these areas to see these potentials, which is one of the reasons why the Buddha said that the whole of the holy life is

having admirable friends, people who can point things out to you. But once you acquire their attitude—which is to look in areas where you may not have thought of before—you begin to see that you can explore on your own.

As you're working with the breath, you'll find that there are parts of the body that are uncomfortable. Well, you learn how to work with them. You don't simply accept them as a given, that the pain's got to stay there. Maybe the pain is being caused by something you're doing. Maybe it's being caused by the way you perceive the body, or your relationship to the body, or how you hold the energy in the body. Some malfunctions of the organs can be that way, too. The circulation gets cut off to a particular organ because the breath energy's been cut off there, and it's going to suffer. But that can be remedied. So this is a lesson in compassion: Just because someone is suffering doesn't mean they have to keep on suffering. That applies to you, and it applies to other people too.

The teaching on karma doesn't say that when somebody's suffering they must deserve it because of something they did in the past. When you see somebody's present situation, you're not seeing the sum total of their past actions. There may be potentials in their karma field for something good. So when you see that there's a pain, or there's suffering, and there's something you can do about it, try your best to think of a way of helping out.

Once there is a sense of well-being, try to maintain it. Try not to get bored, just by being still, just by having a sense of well-being. This is a skill you're working on, because you're trying to create a good foundation in the mind. You're trying to create a new sense of what is normal for you. Psychologists have noticed that a lot of people have a happiness quotient, where the events of life may raise or lower their level of happiness for a little while, but then they tend to get back to their default level, and nothing much can budge them out of that level. Well, meditation is one of the things that can budge you. It takes a while. Sometimes there's a sense of well-being in the breath, and it feels not quite right to have so much well-being. Some people are afraid of well-being, afraid that if they enjoy the well-being they're going to be setting themselves up for a fall. Those are attitudes you've got to erase. Well-being is something that can be maintained, and it's a good thing. It's not a question of whether you deserve it or not.

The word "deserve" never appears in the Buddha's teachings except for one thing—arahants deserve our respect and our generosity—but there's nothing about people deserving to suffer. After all, when the Buddha taught how to put an end to suffering, he didn't first ask people, "What karma did you do in the past that's making you suffer right now? I'll teach you only if you don't have any bad karma." If he had said that, he wouldn't have had anybody to teach. He taught an

end to suffering for all cases of suffering, whether it was “deserved” or not. So learn how to maintain a sense of well-being, and don’t listen to the thoughts that say you don’t deserve it.

And as I said, don’t get bored with it. This happens all too often: People get a sense of well-being and they get bored, and then they start looking for trouble, rather than continuing to build on top of their well-being. But here, building on top of it is what we’re trying to do. We get a sense of well-being in the body, a sense of well-being in the mind, then we ask ourselves, “What more can be done to raise the level of well-being?” But first you’ve got to get your foundation solid. And it turns out, by solidifying the foundation, the next step will appear. So don’t keep casting your eyes down the path, asking, “When is insight going to come?” or “When’s the next step going to come?” Keep your eyes focused on what you’re doing right here, right now, and whatever ways the mind is going to develop, it will come from focusing right here, right now. There’s no such thing as right anticipation as a factor of the path.

These lessons in well-being around the breath transfer into lessons about the right attitude toward well-being outside. You have to have empathetic joy for yourself now that you have a sense of well-being here. Learn how to maintain it, protect it. This helps you learn how not to be jealous of other people’s well-being. You want to encourage them in learning how to be skillful, too, and how to maintain their well-being. Because, as we see all around us, some people have status, they have wealth, they have power, and they seem to be doing their best to abuse it. Which means they’re destroying the foundation for their well-being—but they don’t even know what they’re doing. So instead of thinking, “It serves them right,” you think, “What can be done to help them see the error of their ways, so they can get back to providing a foundation for their well-being?”

The Buddha was able to teach people of all kinds, from the bottom levels of society all the way up to the top. He wasn’t jealous of the people at the top; he didn’t look down at the people at the bottom. He considered everyone equal in the sense of wanting to find true happiness. Some of the people were really, really deluded about how they went about it. So his job was to help explain things so that the people, if they were interested, could get past their suffering, maintain their well-being. But there was that big if: *if* they were interested.

Someone once asked the Buddha, now that he had opened up the way to awakening, was the whole world going to go there, or half of the world, or a third of the world? The Buddha didn’t answer. Ven. Ananda was afraid that the questioner would get upset because the Buddha didn’t answer what he thought was an important question, so he pulled the man aside and gave him an analogy.

He said it's like a frontier fortress. There's one gate, with a wise experienced gatekeeper, and he walks around the fortress. Aside from the gate, he doesn't see any holes in the wall big enough for even a cat to slip through. And so, because he's wise, he doesn't come to the conclusion that so-and-so many people are going to come into the fortress, but he does know that any sizable animal coming into the fortress will have to go through the gate. In the same way, the Buddha established his teaching, pointed out the way, and said that if you're going to gain awakening, this is how it's done. But it wasn't his job to determine how many people were going to follow his path. He couldn't make people follow the path. After all, we do have freedom of choice.

It's because of this freedom of choice we need to have equanimity. You learn equanimity as you're working with the breath. You realize that some parts of the body won't change no matter how well you breathe, no matter where you focus, no matter how strong your concentration—but you can work around them. You don't have to let them be obstacles. You just do your best in spite of them. And this is how you have to deal with people outside. There are obstacles out there, the people who will not budge, will not change their ways, so you have to learn to work around them. You're doing your best. As for how the chips will fall in the end, some of those things are under your control, but a lot of them are not.

This is where equanimity comes in, along with the realization that if you're going to make your well-being depend on succeeding in changing the world outside, you have to remember the chant we repeated just now, "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." The thing is, what do you have that is of your own? Just the perfections you build into the mind, the noble treasures you build into the mind. That's an area where you *can* exert some control, where you *can* make a change. And so you do your best to develop your perfections: generosity, virtue, renunciation, discernment, persistence, endurance, truth, determination, goodwill and equanimity.

You work on these, and you hope that their influence will spread out into the world. But you can't determine how many people will benefit from it, just as the Buddha himself couldn't determine how many people were going to follow his way to awakening. Your duty is to work on your perfections, confident that they will be a good influence. As to how far that influence will spread, that's something over which you have no control. But you do know that what you're doing is good, and as long as the cause is good, the results, however far they go, will have to be good results, too.

So as we work with the breath, dealing with the problems of getting the breath

to create a sense of well-being in the body, we're learning a lot of lessons about all the brahmaviharas: how they apply to us right now, and how they apply to life in general, our engagement with the world.

That way, the wish that begins the brahmaviharas—"May I be happy, may all beings be happy"—won't be an empty wish. You may not be able to make all beings happy, but you want to make sure that from your quarter, at least, nothing will interfere with their genuine happiness. And as for your own genuine happiness, you do everything you can to work on it, realizing that it's not a selfish pursuit. The happiness that comes from within is a happiness that doesn't just stay within. It spreads its benefits all around.