

Your Secret Foundation

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They say that the Buddha on the night of his awakening started out by meditating on his breath. You look in the Canon and you see that the most detailed meditation instructions are focused on the breath, the breath as a basis for establishing mindfulness, gaining concentration, discernment, release. Why is this all focused on the breath?

For a lot of reasons. When you're with the breath, you can see a lot of things in the body and the mind. It's like standing on a mountain pass. You look to the north, you can see through the pass to the north. You look to the south, you can see through the pass to the south. The breath is where the body and the mind meet. And when you focus the mind on the breath, you've got all the processes of fabrication right here. There is what's called bodily fabrication: the breath in and of itself. There is verbal fabrication, where the mind directs its thoughts to the breath and evaluates the breath. And then there's mental fabrication, the feelings that arise—the sense of pleasure, the sense of dis-ease, depending whether the breath is comfortable or not—and your perceptions, the labels you put on things.

These are all present right here. Everything you really need to know gathers around the breath. It's like going to the savanna in Africa. If you want to see the animals in the savanna, all you have to do is camp on the watering hole, and everybody comes there.

At the same time, the breath is a good place for developing all kinds of good mental qualities. For mindfulness, you can carry your awareness of the breath throughout the day—"breath" here meaning not only the in-and-out breathing, but also just sense of energy flow in the body. It's always there for you to focus on. It's not like other meditation objects, where you have to visualize things or use a meditation word. The breath is already there. Whether you're intending to meditate or not, it's going to be right there.

So it gives you a good solid foundation, a good frame of reference. If you want to bring the mind to concentration, the breath can be very soothing. If it's not soothing to begin with, you can make it that way. It's a good bodily process to work with. If you're feeling tense, you can breathe in a way that's relaxing. If you're feeling tired, you can breathe in a way that's energizing. It's a good way of bringing things into balance.

And it's a good place for developing insight. The whole point of insight is to see how the process of fabrication leads to stress. And one good way of seeing this

is to look at how your bodily fabrication leads to stress. What ways of breathing are uncomfortable and don't have to be? Often the breath goes on automatic pilot, and you suddenly find yourself breathing in a constricted or tight or very uncomfortable way. You don't have to. Nobody's making you breathe that way. Even if they threw you in jail, they couldn't force you to breathe uncomfortably.

It's through our own lack of attention, our own lack of understanding of the process, that we find ourselves caught up in uncomfortable ways of breathing. So now we can develop our understanding by looking directly at the flow of energy in the body. When you breathe in, does the energy flow up to the head, or does it flow down to the feet? It can go either way. And what happens if there's a lot of up-flow or down-flow? Do you feel the breath energy only in your skin or does it go deeper, say, deep into your brain? Think of your brain as having infinite capacity for taking in breath energy, and see what that does to the process of breathing. Other parts of the body where the breath energy always seems still are the places to settle down. And how do they connect up with the other still spots? If you can connect them up, you've got a good basis for a good whole-body awareness, which is the basis for right concentration.

And what element does your will play in all this? Ajaan Fuang once noted that all the way up into stream-entry, there's always going to be an element of will in the way you breathe. When is it for the good and when is it not? Or when you're ill, what can the breath do for your illness? If you're in pain, what can more skillful breathing do to relieve the pain? These are all things you can explore.

The breath is often very helpful in taking apart your perception of pain. Say there's a pain in your knee. There's usually a notion that there's a big block in your knee of pain. Well, if you think of the breath energy going through it, you see that there are the sensations in your knee that are actually body sensations, the solid sensations. Then there are the breath sensations, and then there are the pain sensations. See them as three different kind of sensations. Take that block apart. You find that the mind has a tendency to glom them all together, but they don't have to be that way. If you can open and air out your perception of pain, that has a very different effect on the mind. You can focus right in on the knee, focus on the breath sensations in the knee, and just put aside the pain sensations. Be very selective in what you focus on. That way you find that you can live with the pain and yet not be pained by it. That's an important skill.

And you begin to see how the process of perception really does shape what you originally thought was just the raw sensation of pain. And you see that it's a fabrication as well. This is probably one of the most important insights: to see how what you think of as given in your experience, say, of the world or your own body

or your own mind, is actually a product of will, not only of past actions of your will, but also your present intentions.

There's a passage where the Buddha says that even your experience of feeling takes a potential for feeling and fabricates it into an actual feeling. And the same goes for the other aggregates. The potential for perception, your potential for fabrication, your potential for consciousness: These are all things coming from past actions and shaped by present intentions into what you actually experience.

You can begin to see this in the breath. The breath is as close as you can get to focusing on the mind without actually focusing directly on the mind itself. It's right next door. And because it's the part of the body that's most sensitive to the movements of the mind, it's a really good mirror for the mind.

So it serves a lot of functions. When you get tired of investigating, or your investigation starts getting blurry, you can just say, "I'll just stay with the breath or be still with the breath." Think of the breath as a comfortable pillow throughout the body. And then just stay with that sensation, stay with that perception, until you feel refreshed enough, and then you can start moving out, questioning the way you breathe, questioning where the breath moves through the body, the way the mind reacts to the breath. In going back and forth like this, you've got the basis both for tranquility and for insight.

So this process—which is part of your body, and your body is only a part of the world— can be turned into something else. It can be turned into your path, so that you go beyond the world, the world we chanted about just now: The world is swept away, it does not endure, it offers no shelter, there's no one in charge. It's insatiable, a slave to craving. You take all that and turn it into your path. You turn it into the Dhamma. And the spot where the transformation takes place is right here at your breath. If you didn't do it with this breath, you've always got the chance to the next breath, and then the next, and then the next. The breath is very forgiving in that way.

When you start seeing the breath as a process of fabrication, you also start seeing the other things going on in your mind as processes of fabrication, too. Start applying the same insight to the world outside. It helps give you some distance. And that sense of distance is a valuable thing. It's not as if you're far away and cut off from something. It's more like you're living with the potentials for all kinds of things that you could make into something but you don't. With things that used to have a huge impact on the mind, you realize that the impact comes not from their reaching into your mind, but from your reaching out and trying to grab hold, making them into something—but you don't have to. That's what the sense of distance comes from.

Ajaan Lee's image is of a match in a box. You could use the match to strike against the side of the box and create a fire, but you don't. You could focus on things in such way that you turn them into a world, and then you'd go along with all the suffering that goes in the wake of that act. But you don't. It's an important skill and it's a skill you learn as you focus with the breath.

So pay a lot of attention to this process of breathing, not only while you're sitting here with your eyes closed with nothing else to do, but also when you *do* have other things to do as well. Often it's useful to catch yourself in the act. When the mind is sitting here meditating, sometimes it's acting up. Other times, everything seems very peaceful and quiet, as when all the kids in the classroom are working hard at their studies. You have no idea that they could create any trouble at all. But when the teacher goes out of the room, all of a sudden they start throwing spitballs and airplanes and beating up on each other. So it's useful as you go through the day to be like the teacher standing just outside the door where the kids don't know the teacher's there, so that the teacher can figure out who are the troublemakers in the room.

If you try to keep the breath as your foundation as you go throughout the day, you'll see a lot of movements of the mind you never saw before. Some of the most liberating insights are the ones that come out of unexpected places like that, as long as you're in the right place to see them, which is where you are when you're staying with a sense of the breath energy in the body.

So keep this as your own secret foundation. Nobody else has to know about it. And as Ajaan Lee once said, the things that nobody else knows about are the ones that are safest.