

# Tuning-in to the Breath

*December, 2002 - Ven. Thanissaro Bhikkhu*

When I first went to stay with Ajaan Fuang, one of the questions I asked him was, "What do you need to believe in order to meditate?" He answered that there was only one thing: the principle of kamma. Now when we hear the word "kamma," we usually think, "kamma-and-rebirth," but he meant specifically the principle of action: that what you do shapes your experience.

If you're convinced of this, you can do the meditation because, after all, the meditation is a *doing*. You're not just sitting here, biding your time, waiting for the accident of Awakening to happen. Even in very still states of meditation, there's an activity going on. Even the act of "being the knowing" is still a doing. It's a fabrication, a *sankhara*. In one of the suttas, the Buddha says that all the different *khandhas*, all the different aggregates that make up experience as a whole, have to get shaped into aggregates by the process of fabrication. In other words, there's a potential for a form, a potential for a feeling, potential for perception, fabrication, consciousness; and the act of fabricating is what turns these potentials into actual aggregates.

It sounds abstract, but it's a very important lesson for the meditation even from the very beginning. You sit here in the body — and of course, that's a fabrication right there: the idea that you're sitting in the body — but given all the many different things you could focus on right now, there's the possibility of choice. This possibility of choice is where kamma comes in. You can choose any of the sensations that are coming into your awareness. It's as if there were a buzz in all the different parts of the body. There's a potential for pain here, a potential for pleasure over there. All these different sensations are presenting themselves to you for you to do something about them, and you have the choice as to which ones you'll notice.

Doctors have done studies showing that pain isn't just a physical phenomenon. It isn't totally a given. There are so many different messages coming into your brain right now that you can't possibly process them all, so you choose to focus on just some of them. And the mind has a tendency to focus on pain because it's usually a warning signal. But we don't have to focus there. In other words, there can be a slight discomfort in a part of the body, and you can focus on it and make it more and more intense, more and more of an

issue. That's *one* thing you can do right now, but — even if you may not realize it — you have the choice of whether or not to do that. You can choose *not* to make it more intense. You can choose even to ignore it entirely. Many times we have habitual ways of relating to sensations, and they're so habitual and so consistent that we think there's no choice at all. "This is the way things have to be," we think, but they don't.

That's the other implication of the principle of kamma: You can change your actions. If some parts of experience are dependent on choice and fabrication, you can choose to change. You see this really clearly when you focus on the breath. The breath is always there in the body, and if you look carefully you'll discover that it has many levels. It's like looking up in the sky: Sometimes you feel a breeze coming from the south, but you look up in the sky and see a layer of clouds moving east, and another higher layer of clouds moving west. There are lots of different layers of wind in the atmosphere and, in the same way, there are lots of different layers of breath in the body. You can choose which ones to focus on.

It's like having a radio receiver: You can choose to tune-in to different stations. The radio waves from all the nearby radio stations, all the different frequencies, are all in the air around us. There are radio waves from Los Angeles, radio waves from San Diego, even short wave radio waves from who-knows-where, all over the place. They're going through this room right now. They're going through your body right now. And when you turn on the radio you choose which frequency you want to focus on, which one you want to listen to. The same with the body. You sort out, of all the possible sensations, just one type of sensation to focus on: the breath-ness of the breath. Wherever you feel the sensation of the in-and-out breath most clearly, you focus right there. Now some of us have a radio we haven't taken very good care of, and as soon as we tune it in to one station it slips over to another. So you've got to keep tuning it back, tuning it back.

But the problem isn't just the tuning. It's what you do with the sensation once you've tuned-in to it. Again, you can focus on the breath in a way that makes it painful, or you can focus on it in a way that makes it comfortable. You're not faced just with the given-ness of the breath. What you do with it can make it more or less painful, more or less comfortable. To continue the analogy, it's like having a volume control on the radio: You can turn it way up loud so that it hurts your ears, or you can turn it way down soft so that you can hardly hear it at all. But as you get more skillful with your volume control, you get a sense of what's just right so that you can adjust the level and the pressure of

your focus for maximum enjoyment.

As you get tuned-in more and more precisely, you discover there are other subtleties as well. Again, like the radio, when you really get tuned very precisely onto the frequency, the static goes away and you can hear subtleties in the signal that you couldn't hear before. You can play with them, turn up the treble, turn up the base, whatever you want. So even though the radio signal is a given, you can do a lot with it. That's the element of kamma in your meditation right now: It's what you're doing with the breath.

You can learn how to be more skillful in how you relate to it so that you can sense not only the very obvious breath of the air coming in and out of the lungs, but also the sensations that go through the whole body as you breathe in, as you breathe out, the patterns of movement in the body that actually bring the air into the lungs and let it go out. There's a wave going through the body each time you breathe. As you become sensitive to it, you begin to sense where there's tension in the body, and where there's not; where the subtle breath flows properly, and where it doesn't.

And, again, it's not just a given. You can do things with that flow. You can improve the flow. If you notice tension in a certain part of the body, you relax it; and oftentimes doing this improves the breath flow not only at that one spot but also in other parts of the body as well. You begin to have a sense of the body as a whole series of different interconnected energy patterns. A tightening up here may lead to a tightening up over there, and it all gets connected in a feeling of overall constriction, of bands of tension squeezing the body. Or you can loosen it up. That's your choice. You can relax this bit of tension here and find that it leads to an unraveling of tension over there. Or you might find that everything gets so loose that you drift off. This means that you've got to learn how to gain a sense of "just right" so that you can stay with the sensation, keep your focus, and even if the radio signal begins to drift a little bit, you can follow it precisely and stay right with it.

At this point you can let go of the sensation of the in-and-out breath — the coarse breath, the obvious breath — and focus more on the subtle breath flow in the body. As you work through all the different parts of the body where it feels tense or blocked or sort of squeezed out, you let the breath sensations fill all those little nooks and crannies, and there comes a greater and greater sense of fullness, refreshment. That's what *piti* means. It's the drinking-in of the good sensation. We normally translate *piti* as rapture, but it's also related to the word for drinking, *pivati*. You drink-in this nice sensation. It feels full, it feels refreshing all the way through the body because you've opened up all the little

cells in the body and allowed the breath to enter. When you get that sense of fullness, it's easier to relax.

This may not be a pretty image, but the mind at this point is like a mosquito when it's finally hit a big vein in your body. It sticks its little proboscis in and just stays right there, bathed in bliss. Its wings go weak, its feet go weak, and no matter how much you try to brush it away, it just doesn't want to go. It's just drinking-in what it wants. The same with the mind: As soon as that refreshing breath sensation begins to fill up in the body, you let go of everything else. No matter what other disturbances come, you're not the least bit interested because you've got something really satisfying. You could almost say that it's a sensation to die for. You let down your guard, let go of everything else, because this sensation is so totally absorbing. You've opened up every part of the body, every part of your awareness for this sensation to come in.

As you stay there and the mind grows more and more still, you become aware of a deeper sensation of absolute fullness with no sense of flowing back and forth — a real stillness in the body. There's a slight sense of air exchange on the very surface of the body, the surface of your awareness, but deep down inside there's a great stillness. There's no longer the sense of drinking-in because you're absolutely full. Ajaan Lee uses the image of an ice cube: There's a vapor coming off the cube — a very vaporous movement around the edge of your awareness — but everything else is solid and still.

And then finally even that vapor stops, and the solidity fills your whole awareness. It's accompanied by a sense of brightness, even though you may not sense this brightness as a light. It's a peculiar quality: a physical sensation, a feeling tone, of brightness, clarity, filling the whole body, and you're just sitting there in the middle of it.

There's no need to rush through these stages, no need to go jumping through hoops. In fact, it's best if you *not* try to rush. Just find one sensation you can tune-in to. Stay right there and it will develop on its own, simply because of the consistency of your focus. When you finally reach that sense of solid stillness and stay there, you begin to realize that you can choose to give a shape to it or not. You can focus on the sensations that give you a sense of the shape of the body or you can choose to ignore them. This is where you really see the principle of kamma coming into play in the meditation. It's almost as if the various sensations of the body have turned into a mist. There are these little breath droplets just shimmering there, and you sense the space in between them. The whole body is filled with this space, which also extends outside the body in every direction. Instead of focusing on the little droplets,

you can focus on the space. This gives you a really clear lesson in how much choice you have in how you experience the present moment. Just the simple sensation of having a body here comes from subconscious shape-giving choices you've made. You realize there are lots of different sensations you can focus on, and there's a skill in how you choose your sensations, in how you magnify the ones you want, and how you just put aside the ones you don't.

So even though this is just training in concentration, there's also a lot of discernment involved. As the Buddha once said, both tranquillity and insight are required for getting good strong states of absorption. And he never talked about insight without framing it in terms of kamma, in terms of the skillfulness of what you're doing.

So this practice is what lays the groundwork so that — when the time comes to consider issues of inconstancy, stress, and not-self — you've got the proper context. You've created a good space inside, a good space in the present moment, so that there's no hungry sense of having to grasp after this or grasp after that. When you've drunk your fill of the fullness and stillness, you're in a much better mood to consider things for what they actually are — so that when insight comes it's not destabilizing. Without this solid foundation, thinking about inconstancy, stress, or not-self can get really disorienting. But when you start thinking about these issues in the context of what you're doing in the meditation, they make it even more stabilizing. This is where concentration, tranquillity, insight, and discernment all come together in a healthy and balanced way.