

Questioning Impermanence

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Someone once asked Ajaan Fuang what kind of food he liked. And his answer was, “The food in front of me.” And that’s the attitude you’ve got to take toward your meditation. What kind of breath do you like? Well, learn to like the breath in front of you. What kind of meditation do you like? Learn to like the meditation you’re doing right now. Don’t worry about what yesterday’s meditation was like, whether it was better than today’s or worse or whatever. It’s gone, it’s past.

You want to be on good terms with what you’ve got right here. That’s the essence of the meditation, learning how to relate to what’s right here right now in such a way that you’re causing yourself the least suffering and actually working toward a stable happiness. Even though a good part of the practice is aimed at the future—there *is* a goal at the end of the path, don’t let anyone tell you otherwise—but a large part of that goal there in the future lies in learning how to relate well to what you’ve got right here, right now.

Take the body as your friend. Take your breath as your friend. Be on good terms with it. All too often when we make the breath an object of meditation, we find other things to do, and the breath comes to seem like an enemy almost. It runs away from us. It becomes the least interesting thing we can think of. We find all sorts of excuses for not meditating. But where does that get you? It gets you nowhere. Time flies past, flies past.

The Buddha had us ask ourselves, “Time flies past, flies past. What are you doing right now?” And your answer had better be, “I’m working on the path.” Otherwise, that food that we ate this morning, we ate yesterday, is not going toward the purpose it’s intended for. We reflect on the fact that we eat food to help with the practice. Otherwise, the generosity in which we’re living here is going to waste. So find ways to make the breath interesting, so that it becomes pleasant to meditate.

As I said, be on good terms with the body. Treat it as your friend. Ask it questions: “What kind of breath would you like right now? How about now? Where are things going well? Where are things *not* going well in the body?” Converse with your body, as Ajaan Lee used to say. Ask it questions. Sometimes it won’t answer, but if you listen for a while, you begin to notice it is really answering you, “This feels good. That doesn’t feel good. Long breathing feels good. Short breathing feels good. Breathing down the back feels good. Breathing down

the front feels good. Breathing into your brain feels good.” There are all kinds of places in the body where you can explore, to see where the breathing feels good, where it doesn’t feel good. And you can make changes. Ask, “How about this? How about that?” As you keep asking questions of the body, after a while it’ll have to start responding. And you can respond to its responses.

But it’s important that you learn to listen. All too often we barge into the meditation with preconceived ideas, “This has to be that way. That has to be this way.” Like the way some people approach a friendship: They come in with all sorts of preconceived ideas about how they’re going to turn that friend into the kind of person they’d like that person to be. Of course, friendships like that, even if they can last for a while, are not very deep. There’s a resistance. But if you learn to listen, learn to watch, learn to observe, to respond to what you’ve observed, you really can learn things from the body, learn things from the breath.

At the same time, you find it’s more and more pleasant to hang around the body, hang around with the breath. It can do a lot of good things for you—just like a good friend—a friend who is helpful, as we chanted just now. The breath not only keeps you alive, it can also provide all sorts of ways of warding off disease. Or if there are diseases that have taken root in your body, it can begin to work around them and soften them up and wear them away. A lot of diseases that are based on tension or poor circulation of the body: When you work with the breath, those diseases go away. And even when they don’t go away, you find that you can live with them a lot more easily and not aggravate them. The breath has a lot to offer if you explore.

So learn to content yourself with what you’ve got right here as your raw materials. This is what we have to work with. You’ve got the body, you’ve got the breath, you’ve got the mind that thinks and is aware. And that’s all you really need. Our problem is that we’re not yet really skillful with these things. We haven’t explored their full possibilities. So sometimes the meditation gets boring. It’s because we haven’t learned how to ask the right questions. We haven’t learned how to watch. All we can think of is all the other things we’d like for the sake of our happiness, to keep ourselves entertained in the present moment or to keep ourselves interested. But you’ve got to learn how to be content: these are the raw materials for awakening. And don’t worry about how long they’re going to stay the way they are right now if you don’t like them. Get to know them and you’ll find there’s more potentials for adjusting them than you might have imagined.

Get so that your favorite breath *is* the breath that’s right in front of you, each time it comes in, each time it goes out. Instead of wishing that things were this way or things were that way, take a good long look at what you’ve actually got. Be

sensitive to what you've actually got, listen to what you've got, and you find it's telling you interesting things about where it is and isn't willing to change. Not only about how the breath works in the body, but also how the mind works, too: You begin to see that reflected in the breath.

As with any good friendship, you learn a lot about yourself in the course of becoming friends. As you start listening to your friend, the friend starts listening to you. And when you find someone who really listens to you, you begin to open up in ways where you start saying things that you've never said before, realizing things about yourself you never realized before.

So take advantage of the fact that you *do* have a breath right now. You don't know how much longer you'll have these breaths coming in, going out, you know. You have the breath, you have an opportunity to stay with the breath and to explore it, to experiment. See where it responds to change, see where it *doesn't* respond to change.

All of the things you need for the sake of awakening are right here: You've got the body, you've got the breath, you've got the mind. The breath is what they call bodily fabrication. Thinking about the breath and evaluating the breath: Those are called verbal fabrication. And the feelings and perceptions that go around the breath, those are called mental fabrications. As the Buddha said, these are all the fabrications you need to know, right here. When you direct your thought to the breath and you evaluate the breath and the feelings of pleasure and pain that come with the breath, you've got all the raw materials for awakening all gathered together.

Now, our problem is that we haven't allowed these things to grow, to develop, to show themselves. We haven't learned how to ask the right questions about them. As the Buddha said, when you lack insight, the question should be, "How should I regard these things? How should I investigate these things?" You look at them to see how they change. And it's not simply a matter of sitting very, very still and watching them change the way a TV screen changes. It's how do they respond to changes in you? How do they respond to changes in each other? When there's a feeling of pain in the body, do you breathe *around* the pain? Do you avoid the pain when you breathe? Or do you breathe through it? When there's pain and pleasure in the body, how do they affect the breath? How does the breath affect them? When you think about the breath, does that change the breath?

Some people, as soon as they focus on the breath, tense up around it. That's their way of keeping something focused and under control. But that doesn't last very long. How can you stay with the breath and yet be relaxed around it? The only way to find out about the pattern of cause and effect in these fabrications is

by experimenting, by asking questions, asking friendly questions, and then listening. When you're all together on good terms like this, then there's the opportunity for knowledge to arise.