

## *Your Higher Power*

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When we meditate on the breath, we're focusing not only on the in-and-out breath, but also on the flow of breath energies in different parts of the body. You try to get the in-and-out breath comfortable. Ask yourself what kind of rhythm would feel good right now. And experiment for a while until you find something that does feel good.

Once you've got something that feels good, you try to maintain it. But at the same time, you have to keep an eye out for changes in the body, because as the mind settles down, the breath-energy needs in the body will change. Something that felt good five minutes ago may not feel quite so good right now. So you make more changes. The point is to find a spot in the body that you can make comfortable with the breath, but without tensing up around it so that you can allow that sense of comfort to spread.

This is where you're thinking about the breath energy flowing through the blood vessels, flowing through the nerves, out to the pores of the skin so that you can be bathed in a sense of well-being. Then you try to maintain that. As you go through the day, if you notice any tension in your breathing, stop for a few minutes and allow it to relax. Once there's a sense of well-being again, allow it to spread.

Any time you're aware of the breath, you want this to be your first reaction: Try to make it comfortable. In this way you reclaim the breath. As the Buddha said, the breath is what fashions our experience of the body. This is how we experience the body from within: through the breath. The way we breathe is going to have an impact both on the body and on the mind. And you're reclaiming the breath.

Otherwise your greed, aversion, and delusion, your fear and your lust—these attitudes in the mind, these emotions of the mind—come and take over. They take over the breath. They have their way of making you breathe so that you feel you've *got* to act on them. They hold the breath hostage. It's as if they were saying, "As long as you don't give in to me, I'm going to hold onto the breath here. I'm going to squeeze it and make it uncomfortable. And only when you give in will things be able to relax." This has happened for so long and for so many times that we believe their threats.

But if we remember that we can take control of the breath, we can weaken those other voices in the mind. Here is where you take that sense of the mind

divided against itself and actually turn it to your advantage. The divided mind or the divided self, especially if more unskillful habits tend to be in charge, can cause a lot of trouble and a lot of suffering: You know something's not good for you but you go for it anyhow. You try all different ways of making up your mind that you're not going to go with it, but they seem to be for nothing—to the point where you lose confidence in yourself.

This is why a lot of techniques for dealing with addictions talk about depending on a higher power. You've given up on yourself, so you need somebody else to come and move in to do the job. Well, if your self were a unitary thing and in bad shape, yes, you would need help from outside. But as the Buddha points out, your sense of self is an activity. It's something you do. We're "selfing" all the time, and we have lots of different selves, lots of different voices in the mind. And although their interaction may have been unskillful in the past, it doesn't have to be that way.

One of the advantages of meditating is that you can change the balance of power inside so that your wiser voices now have the breath on their side, together with a better understanding of how the mind works. When the Buddha taught meditation, he didn't teach just a concentration technique. He also taught right view, which involves understanding how your actions shape what you are: the identity you take on and the world that you assume, based on your identity. And you understand that these things come from your own desires. So he has you cultivate new, more skillful desires, and he also gives you the techniques for strengthening them out so that you become a new you.

You can tap into your higher power. And the word "your" there is important because it is part of your mind. The potential is there. It's just that you've gotten so disappointed in yourself that you're not willing to admit that there's any strength inside you at all. But the potential for strength is there. And meditation combined with right view helps you to take advantage of that potential. In that way, the sense of a divided self becomes your way out of unskillful mindsets.

In other words, you realize that even though something unskillful is being said in the mind—and it feels very strong—it's not the whole mind. It's not the only voice in there. There are other voices as well. If they're strengthened with right view along with the sense of well-being that comes from right concentration and right mindfulness—the ability to remember things you've learned about what works and what doesn't work—then your potential for a higher power inside becomes a reality.

So learn to work on these skills: the skills of getting focused, the skills of allowing the comfortable breath energy to spread through the body. And also

work on skillful ways of thinking about what's going on in the mind, remembering that you're not alone when you're suddenly faced with a very strong desire. You've got your skills. And you've got other members of your committee that really do wish for your true well-being.

This is one of the ironies of the divided mind or the divided self. There's a part of the mind that doesn't really care about long-term happiness or well-being. All it wants is instant gratification. And it's also developed a lack of imagination. A certain sense of discomfort arises in the body, and all you can think of is, "Well, this old addictive behavior is one way of getting past it. It's easy and it's familiar." Even though you know that, over the long term, it's going to be bad, you say, "I'm going to go for it now!" And your lack of imagination tells you that there's no alternative. When you narrow things down like that you force the mind to stick with the addiction.

Well, the meditation gives you an alternative. And when it becomes your default mode, then as soon as you're aware of the breath, you try to make the breath comfortable. There's a sense of well-being right there. That can be your instant gratification. You might ask yourself, when something strongly addictive comes into the mind, where you feel the discomfort. Where do you feel tension or tightness—in what part of the body? Can you use the breath energy to go to that part of the body so that you don't have to feel controlled by that sense of discomfort? You can actually replace it with a sense of well-being.

In this way, your desire for a long-term happiness begins to get more power. It begins to get more traction in the mind. And you realize that even though the problem is inside, the solution is inside as well. The only outside help you need is simply in learning how to take guidance from those who've dealt with similar problems.

When the Buddha talks about the causes of suffering—craving and the fact that suffering itself is a clinging—he's basically talking about addictions. And his way of dealing with addictions is to break them down. Where's the feeling? Where's the perception?—in other words, where is the image in your mind? How does the body feel? What chatter is going on in the mind? You can change these things. And you realize that when you change these things, the addiction is made up of *only* these things, so it's within your power to change them. Now the addiction doesn't seem so monolithic.

I saw a meditation book once in Thailand that had a drawing with a very realistic picture of a tiger face. But then you looked at the body of the tiger, and it was made out of folded paper—the point being that a lot of our desires and angers and fears come on really strong and very threatening, but behind the immediate

threat there's not that much. We've blown these things all out of proportion. So when you can take them apart, you begin to see the Buddha's analysis for suffering applies to *all* instances of suffering.

We cling to our sense of the body. We cling to our feelings, our perceptions, our thought constructs, and our consciousness. And when these things turn on us, we're stuck with what we've clung to. But if you learn how to let go—and letting go means first fashioning more skillful versions of these things, more skillful perceptions and thoughts to give rise to feelings in the body that are a lot more pleasant—then you can get past the unskillful ones.

You can learn how to take them apart and assemble something good in their place because you see that they were just constructs. They'd gotten so habitual that they seemed to be really entrenched. But you can develop new habits simply by doing new things often enough so that your ability to stay with the breath and have a sense of well-being, with a sense that you belong here and that the breath is yours: That becomes your new default mode. And this divided sense of self, you begin to realize, really can be turned to your advantage so that even though the problem is inside, the solution is inside as well.

That's where your inner power, which has been suppressed for so long, has a chance to show itself as a higher power—and that it really is powerful enough to work for your true well-being.