

# *Reclaim Your Breath*

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One of the little-known corners of dependent co-arising is an explanation of how, through the power of ignorance, the way you're breathing can be a cause for suffering. This is one of the reasons why we focus on the breath: to bring knowledge to the process so that at the very least, even though we might not be at the total end of suffering yet, we can still breathe in a way that alleviates a lot of suffering. After all, the breath has an effect not only on the body but also on the mind. So try to be fully aware of the breath. Think of it bathing the whole body, and you're in the midst of this big breath-bath: the breath coming in, the breath going out, the subtler breath energies that flow through the arms, the legs, the different parts of the body. The more sensitive you are to these processes, the more you can use them to help the mind not create suffering for itself.

This is one of the reasons why we focus on the breath not only while we're sitting, but also while we're doing walking meditation, and we then try to carry it into the rest of our lives. We need to be sensitive to this dimension of our awareness, of our body, and of our general being so that nobody else takes it over. In other words, greed doesn't take it over; anger doesn't take it over. Fear, delusion: We don't want these things seizing our breath. We've got to reclaim our breath. That puts us in a better position to deal with the mind's defilements.

You'll often notice, especially when anger arises, that the breath has changed, having an impact on the heart rate and the different hormones going into your bloodstream. In other words, the anger has taken over your body, and when that happens, where can you stay? You feel that you've got to get it out, and for most of us, getting it out means saying something, doing something under the power of the anger. At times like that, your sense of shame and compunction get pretty weak, and you often end up saying things you later regret, doing things you later regret, things that are not in your own interest at all.

So to get a handle on the anger, you've got to learn how to reclaim your breath in the midst of the anger, breathe calmly, and remember what you've learned from your practice of meditation about where your breath has its sensitive spots, the spots that tend to seize up more quickly than others, the ones that cause chain reactions through other parts of the body. Once you identify them, focus on clearing them up.

You can think of the breath energy like traffic in a city. If you've got a traffic jam in one intersection, it spreads down to the next one, then to the next one, and so on throughout the city. If you can't clear up that first traffic jam, you're not going to be able to clear up the other ones. In the same way, there are certain intersections in your breath energy channels that tend to seize up first. It can be in the middle of the chest. It can be in the solar plexus, or someplace deeper down in the abdomen. We all have our own specific spots.

So you want to be especially careful around those spots. Try to keep them open at all times. When anything comes up in the mind, you need to realize, okay, there's a hit of anger, a hit of fear, greed, lust, whatever. Go immediately to that spot and open it up. Try to keep it open and breathe in as calm a way as you can. This doesn't make the anger go away, but it does give you a better place to stand as you're dealing with the anger. You're not totally deprived of your ability to stay in the body. You've got at least one corner that's yours, where you're okay. Try to maintain that, and then, from there, look at the anger, look at your attitude toward the anger.

When the Buddha talks about killing anger, he doesn't say you should feel guilty about having anger. The Buddha doesn't lay guilt trips on anybody. He simply reminds you that it's not in your best interest to let the anger take over. In his words, if you can gain victory over your anger, it's worth a lot more than victory over other people. One of the problems that can come up when we hold our anger in check is that we feel we've lost out to the other side. If we hold the anger in check unskillfully, it can lead to depression. So we've got to learn to think more strategically around the anger.

The wise strategy goes in two directions. One is looking at your assumptions. Which of your assumptions have been violated? When you can identify it, then you have to ask yourself, in all fairness, is it a good assumption? Sometimes it is; sometimes it isn't. If you can begin to see that the assumption was unrealistic, you've got to turn around and deal with it. Ask yourself where it came from, why you're holding onto it when it obviously causes a lot of problems. But if the assumption seems clear and aboveboard, then the next question is how do you skillfully apply that assumption, given that the situation you're presented with doesn't meet the standards set by your assumption? Is right now the time to speak, or do you want to wait a little while later? Is right now the time to act, or do you want to wait until later? And what would be the most skillful thing to say or do?

This is where it's good to live around people who've learned to bring their anger under some control, who can deal with difficult situations, can deal with injustices, can deal with all the problems that really need to be dealt with in the world, in an effective way, without letting the anger take over. You can see from their example how it's done. If you can't live around people like that, try to read up on how the Buddha dealt with difficult people. Read up on other cases of how to deal with difficult people. Just because you're getting some control over your anger doesn't mean that you have to be a doormat, but it is important that you're very clear that winning a victory over yourself is more important than winning a victory over others.

In this case, you're winning a victory over your anger. You're not losing out when you're not showing or expressing your anger. You can think of it as a strategic move. The less you show your anger, the fewer people will know where your buttons are. They won't be able to press them so easily. There are a lot of ways in which life is like a poker game. You don't want to show your hand. You keep it close to your chest, and you want to keep a poker face so that no one else can read you.

So it's not just out of general niceness that you want to control your anger. There are times when you've got to think strategically, and you can't let your anger show—because it is a kind of weakness.

But don't bottle it up. This is why we work with the breath. And don't bottle up the sadness that comes when you can't deal with the issue as quickly as you want. That, too, carries with it a certain way of breathing that's not good for the mind, not good for the body, so try to read that kind of unskillful breath energy as well. This is why right concentration is such an essential part of the path, because it provides you with the skillful pleasure you need to counteract these unskillful influences. You need the sense of rapture or refreshment that comes when the mind settles down and there's a sense of balance inside the body and in the relationship between the mind and the body. That way, this bath of breath really does feel refreshing, and it goes deep, deep, deep into the brain, deep, deep into the heart, all the parts of your body that you tend to close off to any kind of outside influence.

When you close the body off to outside influences, make sure you don't close it off to your good inside influences. Have your heart open to the breath. Have the deep part of your brain open to the breath. All the nerves that feel especially frazzled after you've gone through a day of dealing with difficult people: Let them be open to the breath. Try to get a sense of what's the quickest, most efficient, and most effective way of refreshing them. Sometimes it'll require breathing in ways you've never breathed before, thinking of the breath energies coming into different spots that hadn't occurred to you before.

When I was having heart problems last summer, one of the things I noticed was that if I could think of the breath coming in through the left side of my ribcage, it had a really good influence on the area around the heart. It was a spot I'd never thought of having the breath come in before, but there it was. It worked.

When we're dealing with strong emotions, the same principle applies. We each have our own specific way of holding anger in the body, holding fear in the body, holding lust in the body. You've got to figure out where all the connections are in that act of holding, and how can you undo them. What's the one spot that holds everything else together? Refresh that spot, and a lot of those patterns of tension and tightness can begin to be released. Make sure the energy channels going out your hands and your feet are also open, so that things flow freely.

If there's pressure in any part of the body, remind yourself that it's blood pressure. Breath doesn't have to exert pressure on anything. It goes right through atoms. So if there seems to be a wall of pressure that you can't push the breath through, remind yourself that you've made the mistake of pushing something else beside the breath. You're trying to push the blood there. Just hold the thought in mind, "Breath can flow there, it doesn't push anything." The simple thought of allowing can relieve a lot of the pressure.

So do your best to get acquainted with the breath energy issues in the body, what it means for the breath to flow well, and be ingenious at finding new ways of solving new problems as they come up. That way, this area of the body, this area of the mind that tends to get closed off,

you can start to reclaim and you can use that dimension of your awareness to your own advantage—your own skillful advantage. This is one of those meditative skills that's meant to be used throughout the day, so don't leave it on your meditation cushion. Take it with you. It'll be your support in times of need.