The Breath All the Way (16 Steps)

Mindfulness of breathing, keeping the breath in mind, is the meditation theme the Buddha taught more than any other, and he praised it highly. He said that it can take you all the way to clear knowledge and release: clear knowledge of awakening, release from all suffering and stress. It's also the meditation theme he taught in most detail. You can think of it as your home as a meditator. You may need to go foraging out in other areas, using other themes to deal with specific problems that come up in the mind, but it's good to have the breath as home base, a safe place you come back to.

The Buddha was once advising the monks to practice breath meditation, and one of the monks said, "I already practice breath meditation." So the Buddha asked him, "What kind of breath meditation do you practice?" The monk replied, "I put aside thoughts of the past, don't hanker after thoughts of the future, and try to keep the mind at equanimity in the present as I breathe in, breathe out." The Buddha said, "Well, there *is* that kind of breath meditation but it's not the most beneficial, not the most productive." Then he went on to teach breath meditation in sixteen steps.

So it's good to know the steps, because these are the most effective ways of making the breath into your home base. The steps come in four sets, and each set follows a pattern: You sensitize yourself to an aspect of the mind focusing on the breath in the present, then you notice how that aspect is fabricated—in other words, how it's shaped by your present intentions—and then you try to calm the fabrication.

In the first set, the aspect is the breath itself, as part of your experience of the body. In the second set, the aspect you're focusing on concerns the feelings created by the way you pay attention to the breath. In the third set, the aspect you're focusing on is the state of the mind as it tries to stay with the breath. And in the fourth set, you focus on the mental qualities that are involved in developing dispassion for the whole process of fabrication.

Because of the focus on fabrication, this is an insight practice. Because you're using your understanding of fabrication to bring those fabrications to calm, it's a tranquility practice. So you're working on insight and tranquility in tandem, which makes this an ideal practice for awakening.

You begin with a simple exercise to make you sensitive to the breath, being mindful to notice when the breath is long and when it's short.

You can expand on this exercise to notice other variations in your breathing as well: when it's heavy or light, deep or shallow, noticing whether it's comfortable or not. When you can be sensitive to these variations in the breath, the Buddha gets you to become more actively involved in the breathing process. You train yourself to be aware of the whole body as you breathe in, aware of the whole body as you breathe out. This requires some skill and practice, for you have to learn how to expand your sense of awareness and keep it expanded throughout the body without at the same time losing focus.

One way to approach this is to practice going through the body section by section, noticing how the sensation of breathing feels in different parts of the body. How does it feel in your abdomen? How does it feel in your chest? How does it feel in your head? How does it feel in your back, in your shoulders, your arms, your legs? Remember that breathing is a whole-body process. We think of it primarily as the air coming in and out of the lungs, but there's an energy flow that goes throughout the entire body each time you breathe in, each time you breathe out. It's beneficial to be aware of it in the different parts of the body to make sure it's comfortable in each part and that the different parts are working together and not at cross purposes.

So make a survey throughout the different parts of the body to familiarize yourself with how the breathing feels. That right there is a project that can occupy you for the whole hour. You can do it for many days to get more and more sensitive to the breathing. Think of it as a way of showing goodwill for yourself and goodwill for other people—goodwill in the sense that, as you're learning how to breathe comfortably, you're learning how to create a sense of wellbeing that doesn't have to depend on things outside. It just feels good breathing in, feels good breathing out. When the breathing feels good, you're going to be much less irritable, much less likely to feel oppressed by the situations around you. So even when things go badly outside, you don't sense that they're weighing on you, because you've got your own space right here where you can still breathe comfortably. Having this safe inner space is an act of kindness for others as well, because when you're coming from a comfortable spot here, a comfortable sensation here in the body, you're less likely to act on greed, aversion, delusion, or any of the other ways of being unskillful with others. That way, other people will suffer less from your defilements. This is an essential principle throughout the Buddha's teachings: that if you care for your mind really well, you're not the only person who benefits.

The image that the Buddha gives is of two acrobats. The story goes that an acrobat once said to his assistant, "Okay. You get up on my shoulders and we'll get on top of the bamboo pole. Then you look out after me and I'll look out after you, and that way we'll come down safely." But his assistant said, "No, that's not going to work at all. You look out after yourself, I'll look out after myself, and that way we help one another to come down safely."

In other words, you look out after your balance, because you can't really look out for other people's balance. The best way you can help them is to look out after your balance, and in doing so you don't knock them off balance. So, in helping yourself, you're helping others.

This is true for all the Buddha's teachings. When you're generous, you help yourself and you help others. When you're virtuous, you help yourself and you help others. When you spread thoughts of goodwill, you help yourself, you help others. When you meditate in other ways, you help yourself and you help others. This helps to blur the line between who's helping whom, or who's going to benefit from your practice. You're not the only person benefiting when you're meditating—in the same way that, when you're generous with other people, they're not the only people benefiting. You're benefiting as well.

The Buddha teaches a form of happiness that doesn't have boundaries. And as a step in that direction, you need to train your awareness to be more expansive until its boundaries dissolve. This is what you start doing in the third and fourth steps of the first set, where you train yourself to be aware of the whole body as you breathe in, the whole body as you breathe out. Then you try to calm the breathing. This doesn't mean that you stifle it or stop it. It simply means that you allow the breath energies to interconnect and grow more coordinated so that breath naturally grows more gentle. In any places where the breath feels harsh, you think of it getting lighter and more soothing.

One way you can do this is to think of the breath energy coming in and out of the body through every pore, so it requires less effort on your part to breathe in, to breathe out.

That's the first set of four steps in breath meditation: being aware of short breathing, long breathing, training yourself to be aware of the whole body as you breathe in and breathe out, and then training yourself to allow the breath to grow calm as you breathe in, breathe out, so it feels gentle and soothing.

The next four steps have to do with feelings. First you train yourself to breathe in and out sensitive to rapture. The word *rapture* here can also mean refreshment. Ask yourself, what kind of breathing would feel refreshing right now? Remember that feelings don't simply come and go on their own. The mind helps to fabricate them – in other words, there's an intentional element in every feeling. The way you focus on the breath can give rise to feelings of refreshment, if you do it right. So, ask yourself, "How can I breathe in a way that would feel refreshing, feel full throughout the body, full as I breathe in, full even as I breathe out?"

Once you've mastered that, the next step is to breathe in a way that feels easeful and pleasant. The difference between refreshment and pleasure is that refreshment is like coming across a glass of water after you've been out in the desert. It's a very intense, energetic pleasure – sometimes so intense or overwhelming that it's actually unpleasant. Pleasure, however, is cooler, gentler, more easeful.

Once the breath gives rise to feelings of ease, the Buddha tells you to breathe in and out sensitive to what he calls *mental fabrication,* to see how the feelings induced by the breath have an effect on your mind, and how your perceptions have an effect on the mind as well.

Perceptions are labels – the words or mental images you apply to things to identify them to yourself, such as the labels you apply to the breath. What kind of mental image do you have of the breathing? If you think of the body as a big bellows that you have to pump to pull the breath in and push the breath out, that's going to make the breath coarse and tiresome. It's not going to be so easeful and soothing for the mind. But if you think of the body as a large sponge, with lots of holes that allow the breath to come in and go out, just holding that perception in mind eases the breathing process. It's also a more easeful perception to hold in your mind. It has a more calming effect on the mind. If you find that your breathing is laborious, you can think of the breath energy coming in and out of the forehead, down from the top of the head, in through your eyes, in through your ears, in from the back of the neck going down your back, in at your throat going down through the chest to the heart. Just hold those images in mind and see what impact they have on the breathing and on your mind.

In the next step, the Buddha says to try to find the perception or feeling that's most calming to the mind. If you find that the sponge perception is more calming, you hold on to that.

If it's more easeful to think of the breath coming down from the top of the head, or in and out of the palms of your hands, the soles of your feet, then hold those perceptions in mind. There are lots of different perceptions you can play with. Try to find the ones that are most calming for you right here, right now. Those are the four steps that deal with feeling.

The next four steps deal with the mind. To begin with, you just want to be aware of the state of your mind as you breathe in, the state of your mind as you breathe out. As you do this, you want to notice if it's in balance or out of balance. If it's out of balance, there are different ways you can deal with it.

If the mind is feeling depressed, sluggish, or stale, ask yourself how you could breathe in, how you could breathe out in a way that would be gladdening to the mind. What kind of breathing would give energy to the mind, give refreshment to the mind? Or you can branch out and use other topics of meditation to gladden the mind as well. Think about the Buddha, to see if that creates a sense of gladness. Try thinking about the Dhamma, the Sangha. See if that gives a sense of gladness. Think about the times you've been virtuous or generous in the past, and see if that's encouraging. In other words, any Dhamma topic that helps to gladden the mind: You can bring that in and use it. Then, when it's done its work, go back to the breath and try to maintain that sense of gladness.

Alternatively, if the mind is feeling scattered or restless, what kind of breathing could steady it? Or what other meditation topics could steady it? Here you might find that if you're feeling lazy and don't really want to meditate, you can focus on the reflection on death, or on those five reflections we chanted just now: remembering that you're subject to aging, illness, death, and separation. The only things you really can hold onto are your actions. Where do your actions come from? They come from the mind. And if your mind isn't trained, what's it going to do? A lot of unskillful things. So the best way to prepare for aging, illness, and death is to train the mind. Thinking about death can have a riveting effect on the mind. You can try the contemplation that the Buddha recommends: Every morning at dawn, as you see the sun rise, remind yourself: This could be your last sunrise. Are you ready to go? The usual answer is No. Well, why not? What changes need to be made in the mind so that you would be ready to go? After all, very few people know, at sunrise, that this is going to be their last day. You could be one of those people.

So you don't want to be heedless; you don't want to be caught off guard. Thinking in this way is an encouragement to practice. It focuses the mind. Then again, at sunset, the Buddha said, remind yourself that this could be your last sunset; you might die tonight. Are you ready to go? If the answer is No, you've got work to do. And you know what work you've got to do: You need to train the mind—at the very least, get it more steady, more resilient. Train it to let go of all its foolish attachments. That requires work. You need training. When these thoughts have focused the mind, bring that focus back to the breath.

Finally, if the mind is feeling burdened, figure out how to release it from its burdens, particularly if it's being burdened with unskillful thinking. These might be thoughts of sensuality or thoughts of anger. How can you let go of those? Sometimes you focus on the object of the thinking, sometimes on the thinking itself. If the object is one that excites desire, look at the side that's not so desirable. This is why we have the contemplation of the body. The body may look pretty on the surface, but if you took off the skin, you couldn't look at it at all. You'd run away. And yet why is it, with just that little film of skin wrapping it up, that we perceive it as attractive? What's the mind doing to itself? What games is it playing with itself, so it focuses only on the things that it perceives as attractive, and blots out everything else?

Similarly with anger: Usually, when you're feeling angry at somebody, all you can do is focus on their unattractive side, the unappealing side, the unpleasant side. You can work yourself up into a real fury. But are you really being fair? Are you being fair to the other person? Are you being fair to yourself? After all, who's suffering from your anger? You're certainly suffering from it right now.

So if you find that the mind is being burdened by things like this, you find ways of unburdening it. The Buddha takes this even deeper, into the subtlest levels of concentration. Each level has a certain element of stress that's very subtle, but it's there. When the mind gets focused on a level of concentration, sit with it for a while to get to know it really well, until you recognize what's really going on in that state of concentration. This can take a while, because when you first hit a new level of concentration, you often don't really see the whole thing. You see that the mind seems less stressful than before. You don't see any stress in this concentration at all. But you have to get familiar with it until you begin to see that there is still a little bit of inconstancy, a little bit of wavering in the concentration, or there are certain mental activities that are a little bit burdensome—not

much, but enough so that you can notice the variations in the stress. When you notice these activities and can see that they're unnecessary, then you can drop them.

This last step combines both insight and tranquility: insight into the tranquility, and tranquility in response to the insight. As the Buddha says, insight is what releases the mind from ignorance; tranquility is what releases the mind from passion. They have to work together for the release from any burden—from the gross to the refined—to be complete.

That's the last of the steps dealing with the state of the mind as a whole.

But it moves you into the final set of four steps, which have to do with what they call *dhammas,* or mental qualities: the component factors that go into shaping the state of the mind.

The first step in this final set is learning how to look at inconstancy. Sometimes this word, *anicca,* is translated as impermanence, but the issue is not so much that things are impermanent, it's just that they keep changing unreliably. If you think about that mountain over there, the mountain is impermanent, but you can tell yourself, "At least it's solid enough for me. I could build a house on it and not worry about the ocean washing it away in my lifetime." But if you apply the perception of inconstancy to the things you depend on for your happiness, you see that if there's even the slightest bit of change or unreliability in those things, it's threatening. That's what the Buddha is pointing to. There are so many things in life that we pin our happiness on, pin our hopes on, but you have to look carefully at them to see if they really are dependable. They change right before your eyes. Even the state of concentration, which in the beginning seems so solid, after a while shows some wavering. It, too, has its ups and downs. And so the question is, What's causing that? What is the mind doing that's creating that rise and fall in the level of stress?

This is where you begin to get into the four noble truths. As the Buddha said, each truth has a duty. The duty with regard to stress is to comprehend it, which means watching it carefully so you can see exactly what it is—in particular, to see where it's coming from and then develop dispassion, both for the stress and for its cause. This is why watching inconstancy is an important part of seeing stress because it allows you to see that the level of stress will go up and go down, which signals that certain things are happening in the mind to cause it to go up, and other things are happening to cause it to go down. But what are those things? Feelings and perceptions.

This is why the Buddha has you get sensitive to mental fabrication. What are your perceptions right now? What are the feelings? What are the perceptions that you apply, say, to pleasure, that you apply to pain?

And how do they increase or decrease the level of stress in the mind? If you see that they cause an increase, drop them, because that's the duty with regard to the cause of stress: to abandon it, to let it go. You do this by developing the path, which we've been doing all the way through, with all these steps of meditation, so you can induce the sense of dispassion that allows you to abandon the cause of stress. That's why we look at inconstancy: to get a sense of dispassion for the things we're attached to.

You really have to understand what attachment is all about. You're attached to things because they give pleasure, and even when you're attached, you can admit that the pleasure's not constant and that it takes some effort. Still, it seems that you get at least enough pleasure to make the effort worthwhile. But what the Buddha wants you to see is that the pleasure is not worth the effort at all, that the drawbacks of that particular pleasure are much greater than the actual nourishment you get from it. After all, the mind tends to delude itself. It sees its pleasures as wonderful. It paints them up. It dresses them up. It elaborates on them so they seem much more wonderful than they actually are. The Buddha wants you to really look at that fact, that process in action. What is the gratification you get out of that pleasure? What are the drawbacks of that pleasure?

It's through this kind of analysis that you gain the insight allowing you actually to let go of things. If you simply see things as empty, as changing in line with conditions, you can drop them temporarily, but they come back because there's still a part of the mind that says, "Well, even if they're changing with conditions, the pleasure I get out of them is worth the effort I put into getting those conditions right." That's what you have to look into. Where is the actual pleasure here? Where is the effort? Where's the pain and stress in the effort? Do they give you a good deal or a bad deal? That's what it comes down to: What kind of deal are you giving yourself? The Buddha has you look at this until you see how you've been fooling yourself. To see the foolishness on both sides—the side that likes to deceive and the side that likes to be deceived—gives rise to a sense of disenchantment and dispassion.

That's the next step, focusing on dispassion, because it's through passion that we get involved with things to begin with. We get attached to them. We create these things.

As the Buddha said, in every experience of form, feeling, perception, fabrication, and consciousness, there's an intentional element. A thought arises in the mind and you get involved, turning it into a state of becoming, a little world in which you can dwell. A feeling arises, and you elaborate on it. A perception arises and either you go with it or you don't.

But there's a choice being made there. Sometimes the arising of these things comes from past kamma, but then it's up to you to decide whether you want to go with them or not. That decision is your present kamma. It's like somebody driving up in a car and saying, "Okay, jump in, let's go." You actually have the choice to jump in or not jump in, and if you're wise you're going to ask, "Who are you? Where are you going? What's going to happen if I jump in?" That's if you're wise, because it turns out that this is not going to be a free ride. You're going to have to pay for the gas. Will it be worth it? You may actually have to pedal the car, if it turns out to be a pedal car. Is it worth it? And where is the driver planning to take you? Is he going to rob you, kill you, and dump you off the side of the road? When you see that it's not worth it, your mind grows calm in the face of any temptation to jump in the car. That's the tranquility that follows on discernment and releases you from passion. Dispassion comes in its place, and when the dispassion comes, fabrications begin to stop—because what keeps them going is your passion. When there's no passion, fabrications all cease. So you watch them ceasing, ceasing, ceasing, because of dispassion.

That's the third step in the last set of four: focusing on cessation.

Then the final step of breath meditation is to stay focused on relinquishment as you breathe in and out. You let go of everything. Even the path gets abandoned at this point because you don't need it anymore. It's like having a set of tools. As long as you have to work with the tools, you take good care of them, you look after them. But there comes a point when the job is done and you let even the tools go. In other words, all your attachment even to the path—the concentration, the discernment—gets abandoned at that point as well—each time you breathe in, each time you breathe out.

So this is the kind of breath meditation, the Buddha says, that gives great rewards. It develops the four establishings of mindfulness; it develops all the seven factors for awakening. You're developing mindfulness in keeping the breath in mind.

As you analyze how you're doing this practice skillfully or unskillfully, how you're fabricating your sense of the body and mind in the present through the breath and the feelings and perceptions around the breath, that develops the analysis of qualities as a factor for awakening. You try to do your best to fabricate these things in skillful ways, and abandon any unskillful fabrications: That's your persistence, energy, effort as a factor for awakening. As you do these things skillfully, refreshment and ease arise: Those are the rapture and the serenity factors for awakening. You develop concentration and the ability to watch with equanimity all these things as they're happening. When you have all these seven factors together, they're the qualities you need to bring the mind to awakening. And these factors are all being developed as you practice these sixteen steps.

As the Buddha said, these factors lead to knowledge and release—the knowledge of awakening, understanding what the mind's been doing that's been causing stress, how it can let go of the cause. When you've completed all the duties with regard to the four noble truths, the mind is released and no longer creates any unnecessary burdens for itself. It tastes the deathless.

So this is what breath meditation can do. It's not just a preliminary exercise. It's a path that can take you all the way. You can augment it with other practices, as I've said. When the mind needs gladdening or steadying, when you find that you're stuck with unskillful mental qualities, you can use other techniques to pry the mind free from them. But the breath is where you always come back. It's your home because it's right here, where the body and the mind meet. It's the ideal place to watch both what's going on in the body and what's going on in the mind. And it's one of the few bodily functions you can control to give rise to a sense of wellbeing that allows you to stay steadily right here.

This way you can begin to see things as they actually are, as they're actually happening and being fabricated, to see where your habits of fabrication are causing unnecessary suffering and stress. You come to see that the stress is actually unnecessary. There are choices you're making as you fabricate your experience out of the raw materials that come from past actions and, through the path, you learn how to make these choices more and more skillful to the point where there's really nothing more to do. Everything is at perfect equilibrium. Any further intention—either to stay there or to move on—would just cause stress. And you see this clearly. At that point the mind lets go.

So whatever other meditation you practice, make sure that at the very least you've got your home base covered. As the Buddha said, when you get involved in other meditation topics, unskillful states can sometimes arise, in which case you should always come back to the breath. He compared it to the beginning of the rainy season in India. During the hot season everything is dry with lots and lots of dust in the air. But when the first rains come, they wash all the dust out of the air and leave the air very clean, clear, and refreshing. The same way with breath meditation: When you do it right, it can clear the mind, refresh the mind, wash away all its dust.

So give time to this skill because it's the most basic skill in training the mind. It's your foundation, and you want to make sure the foundation is strong. If you try to build a building with a weak foundation, it's going to fall over. No matter how beautiful the building may be, it's going to collapse. But when the foundation is strong, you can build as many stories as you like and you don't have to worry about them falling down at all.

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