

## **Breathe Dharma**

If we seriously want to practise Buddhism or want to enjoy the full benefits of being a Buddhist (a follower of the Buddha's teaching), then we must learn to breathe Dharma. Breath is life, the most precious thing that we are, our very being. It is both our body and our mind, as we shall soon see.<sup>1</sup>

Breathing Dharma begins with our understanding of what the breath really is. Physically, it is air or the wind element, coming in and going out of our body. The air inside us and the air all around us are the same air or wind element. It is not just static air, but moving air, wind, that is, motion.<sup>2</sup>

Everything inside us, everything in this universe, moves. Everything is in motion: this is a truth of impermanence. The air inside us and the air outside are the same air, and they are impermanent. It is not just the air that gives us life, but it is also moving, it is the wind element.<sup>3</sup>

When we begin to understand this, then we begin to breath Dharma in our daily lives. This means that we understand that breath is life, and life is the most precious thing that we have. Indeed, we are *life* itself. Without life, nothing is meaningful.

The value of our breath comes not from how many times we breathe; it is not a matter of numbers. Its value lies in *how* we breathe. We must breathe happily. If we breathe unhappily, we will be unhappy and build a habit of suffering. In fact, it helps to simply smile at our breath. Notice how good we feel with this simple random gesture.

Happiness is not found, it is made. We can spend all our lives, here and hereafter, looking for happiness, we will never really find it. It is not outside of us. What is outside of us is not really ours, and can be lost. What can be lost, does get lost. That is why we are never really happy with what is outside of us, whether they are people or things.

To be truly happy and healthy, we need to breathe freely, and to breathe fresh air. If we learn to be happy (as stated earlier), then it is easier to breathe freely and healthily. Notice when we breathe painfully, our heart-rate increases, and when we are angry, our blood pressure rises, as it does when we are in fear or have some negative emotion.

Notice how peaceful and gently rhythmic our breath is when we are truly happy and at peace. When we have true friends, and we are true to ourselves, we breathe easier. The truth that is timely and meaningful helps us to breathe easy, to breathe happily. On the other hand, we tend to hold our breath when we lie or face some difficulty or someone false. If this happens often enough, we might even suffocate in such lies and falsity.

To overcome and prevent this suffocating effect, we need to go beyond the bodily breath. This bodily breath is closely linked to our physical body. Our breath is often caught up with our eye, ear, nose, tongue and body. When we see something that excites us, our breath races ahead. When we hear something we do not like, we have to catch our breath. When we smell something enticing, we forget to breathe. When we taste something we dislike, our breath expires through our mouth. When our body feels miserable or in pain, our breath rattles unevenly.

Breathing with the body alone is neither happy nor healthy for us. It can also be tiring: notice how we breathe heavily when we are tired. The body then needs more air: our blood needs more oxygen, we say. The reality is that we are burning ourselves faster. This is the fire element at work. It is also called decay, a process that begins with our birth, and is still going on, and only ceases at death (so it seems).

We enjoy better happiness and health when we learn to breathe with the mind, or the heart, as meditators like to say. In breath meditation, we begin by sitting comfortably and quietly, giving all

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<sup>1</sup> From here on, we reflect on how the values behind the 5 precepts work in breath meditation.

<sup>2</sup> It is one of [the 4 primary elements](#): see SD 17/2a (see the suttas and notes mentioned there).

<sup>3</sup> **Mahā Rāhu'ovada Sutta** (M 62,8-17/1:421-426), SD 3.11: [link](#).

our physical senses a good rest, and direct our attention fully to the breath. We watch the breath because it is regular and it becomes more peaceful if we keep our mind on it.

The breath, more importantly, is the door to the mind or heart. This means that when we learn to give our physical senses a good rest, we will experience a remarkable bliss that is both healing and memorable. How do we do this?

As we continue to sit quietly, letting go of all feelings of liking or disliking – letting go of all commenting and judging – of how we feel, even if it is some discomfort or pain.<sup>4</sup> We keep our mind fully on the breath so that it becomes a peaceful and beautiful breath.

As our breath becomes more restful and pleasant, we see a space of breathless peace arising after each in-breath and each out-breath. These peaceful spaces often grow longer so that we need less breath. We have not really stopped breathing: it is that the breath is becoming less physical. It is becoming a more mental process.

As the “breath” seems to disappear, we feel only the “beautiful.” We are imbued with bliss. We have begun to truly enjoy (en-joy, bring joy into) our meditation. The breath-door is fully open and we have moved through it into the boundless space of inner bliss. We should stay in this seemingly timeless bliss as long as we can.

Even if we are unable to do this for a long period, we could do this for just a few moments a day. We should learn to take a “breather” when things around us do not seem right, to recharge and heal ourselves with the breath, and let its peace touch others. Silently breathe in all that negative energy, hold it for as long as you can (to absorb all the negative energy within into the breath, as it were), and then gently breathe it all out. Then breathe normally again with a smile in our hearts.

This breath meditation is only complete and effective when we do it with lovingkindness. This is an unconditional acceptance of ourselves and others into our lives, that is, into our hearts. We understand that love is not something we get: we only have love when we give it away. When we breathe in we accept ourselves just as we are; when we breathe out, we accept others just as they are.<sup>5</sup>

It truly helps to close our breath meditation with lovingkindness. After a good session of breath meditation, we should cultivate lovingkindness to ourselves and to others.<sup>6</sup> Indeed, the most strategic time to do this is just after a blissful experience of “breathless” peace (when the breath is so peaceful, we only feel the peace and bliss of it). Having emerged from such a state, in the calm and clarity of our hearts, we radiate our lovingkindness to the world from the radiant lotus of love in our hearts, illuminating our body and mind, to everyone around us or nearby, to our loved ones, and to everyone else (including animals and non-humans, if we feel like doing so.)

So we have learned to breathe Dharma. We are reminded that we are breathing beings, and our breath is the door to inner peace and to spiritual liberation.

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<sup>4</sup> We could, of course, mindfully adjust our posture if we are really uncomfortable, but if we begin by sitting properly in a conducive place, we should be able to move less or not at all during such a meditation. Practice makes perfect.

<sup>5</sup> See “Keep what you cannot lose” (R205b; see *Simple Joys* 3 no 20): [link](#).

<sup>6</sup> On how to do this, see **Karaṇīya Metta Sutta** (Khp 9 = Sn 1.8) & SD 38.3 (2): [link](#).