

## The truth is in how you breathe

A voice that often bugs me as I complete each reflection is whether it is another splash in the play-pool of clever words. To write with feeling is clearly harder than to write what we think. The two are clearly different as our experience of the Buddha's Buddhism deepens.

The sweetest taste that Buddhism promises us is that of spiritual freedom. But if our tongue is still busy with another mouthful, let us at least find a proper spoon to taste the Dharma meal with when it comes. And what a breath-taking meal this will be. Here is how we prepare ourselves for life's true feast.

### (1) Watching the present moment

We begin breath meditation by simply "**letting it come, letting it go.**" The most popular opening gambit involves watching the breath, that is, breath meditation.<sup>1</sup> As we watch the breath (that is, keeping our mind on *the awareness of the breathing process*), some physical discomfort may arise. Then, we simply note that discomfort as an experience without any comment (this is "non-judgemental awareness"), and whenever distraction arises we bring our attention back to watching the breath.

The main difficulties we face in meditation are mostly rooted either in the past or the future. In the initial uneasy stillness of the meditating mind, unhappy thoughts of things done or undone in the past may arise, or one may project fond hopes of the future. These are simply tricks the "doing mind" forces on us.

To let go of the past means not thinking about our work, or family, or responsibilities, or bad times we had as a child. We abandon all past experiences by showing them no interest at all. We let go of even what happened to us just a moment ago. When we meditate, in a way, we become *someone with no history*.

### (2) Silent awareness of the present moment

Our inner speech or mental chatter prevents us from mentally focusing. The opposite of these negative states is *the silent awareness* that arises in meditation, and to value this, we need to remove the importance we give to our thinking, or the way we think. In this way, we are ready for the more valuable truthfulness of silent awareness that will raise the quality of our lives.

One way of overcoming inner speech or mental chatter is to cultivate a more refined present-moment awareness, watching every moment so closely that we have no time even to comment on what has just happened.

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<sup>1</sup> See *Ānāpāna,sati S* (M 10) = SD 7.13.

Another useful method of cultivating silent awareness is to recognize the space in between thoughts during a period of inner chatter. If we look carefully—and we need to—we will notice that little window of silence.

### (3) “Sustained attention on the breath”

We now go on to *silently know* that the breath is coming in, or going out. We need to go on doing this for, say, a hundred breaths successively, without any break or missing even one. This is **the third stage** of the forest-method breath meditation, known as “sustained attention on the breath.”

We cannot *make* this stage happen. It comes *naturally* when we have properly and patiently done the previous stages. We silently know that the breath is coming in, that it is going out, that is, at the first touch of it, as soon as it arises.

### (4) “Full sustained attention on the breath”

Then we go on to observe the sensations that gradually arise through *the one and same breath*, not missing a moment of it. When the in-breath finishes, we *know* that moment: we *see* in our minds that last moment of the in-breath. Then we notice there is a pause or gap before the next breath comes, or even longer pauses before the next breath. If we are a bit unsure about this, just *feel* the stillness of the pauses, and enjoy them.

Then we go on to notice the very first moment of the out-breath, and we notice every sensation of the process of the out-breath, until it disappears, completing the exhalation. All this is done silently and in the present moment. And we go on doing this for many hundreds of breath in a row.

Remember: “You” cannot reach this stage; only the mind reaches this stage. This is where the mind takes care of itself, as it were, and it does so very well indeed, if you just let it.<sup>2</sup>

Revisioning 15  
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<sup>2</sup> This writing is inspired by Brahmavamso, “Cultivate tranquility, harvest insight.” *Buddhadharma Quarterly*, fall 2004. Download from <http://www.thebuddhadharma.com/issues/2004/fall/ajahn-brahm.html>; also on <http://sites.google.com/site/santifm10/ajahnbrahm>.