

CONDENSED BREATH MEDITATION

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There are lots of people who are ashamed to talk about their own defilements, but who feel no shame at talking about the defilements of others. Those who are willing to report their own diseases--their own defilements--in a straightforward manner are few and far between. As a result, the disease of defilement is hushed up and kept secret, so that we don't realize how serious and widespread it is. We all suffer from it, and yet no one is open about it. No one is really interested in diagnosing his or her own defilements....

We have to find a skillful approach if we hope to wipe out this disease, and we have to be open about it, admitting our defilements from the grossest to the most subtle levels, dissecting them down to their minutest details. Only then will we gain from our practice. If we look at ourselves in a superficial way, we may feel that we're already fine just as we are, already know all we need to know. But then when the defilements let loose with full force as anger or delusion, we pretend that nothing is wrong--and this way the defilements become a hidden disease, hard to catch hold of, hard to diagnose....

We have to be strong in fighting off defilements, cravings and illusions of every sort. We have to test our strength against them and bring them under our power. If we can bring them under our power, we can ride on their backs. If we can't, they'll have to ride on our backs, making us do their work, pulling us around by the nose, making us want, wearing us out in all sorts of ways.

So are we still beasts of burden? Are we beasts of burden because defilement and craving are riding on our backs? Have they put a ring through our noses? When you get to the point when you've had enough, you have to stop--stop and watch the defilements to see how they come into being, what they want, what they eat, what they find delicious. Make it your sport--watching the defilements and making them starve, like a person giving up an addiction...See if it gets the defilements upset. Do they hunger to the point where they're salivating? Then don't let them eat. No matter what, don't let them eat what they're addicted to. After all, there are plenty of other things to eat. You have to be hard on them--hard on your "self"-- like this..."Hungry? Well go ahead and be hungry! You're going to die? Fine! Go ahead and die!" If you can take this attitude, you'll be able to win out over all sorts of addictions, all sorts of defilements--because you're not pandering to desire, you're not nourishing the desire which exists for the sake of finding flavor in physical things. It's time you stopped, time you gave up feeding these things. If they're going to waste away and die, let them die. After all, why should you keep them fat and well fed?

No matter what, you have to keep putting the heat on your cravings and defilements until they wither and waste away. Don't let them raise their heads. Keep them under your thumb. This is the sort of straightforward practice you have to follow. If you have endurance, if you put up a persistent fight until they're all burned away, then

there's no other victory which can come anywhere near, no other victory which is anywhere near a match for victory over the cravings and defilements in your own heart.

This is why the Buddha taught us to put the heat on the defilements in all our activities--sitting, standing, walking and lying down. If we don't do this, they'll burn us in all our activities....

If you consider things carefully, you'll see that the Buddha's teachings all are exactly right, both in how they tell us to examine the diseases of defilement, and in how they tell us to let go, destroy and extinguish defilement. All the steps are there, so we needn't go study anywhere else. Every point in his doctrine and discipline shows us the way, so we needn't wonder how we can go about examining and doing away with these diseases. This becomes mysterious and hard to know only if you study his teachings without making reference to doing away with your own defilements. People don't like to talk about their own defilements, so they end up completely ignorant. They grow old and die without knowing a thing about their own defilements at all.

When we start to practice, when we come to comprehend how the defilements burn our own hearts, that's when we gradually come to know ourselves. To understand suffering and defilement and learn how to extinguish defilement gives us space to breathe....

When we learn how to put out the fires of defilement, how to destroy them, it means we have tools. We can be confident in ourselves--no doubts, no straying of into other paths of practice, because we're sure to see that practicing in this way, contemplating inconstancy, stress and not-selfness in this way at all times, really gets rid of our defilements.

The same hold true with virtue, concentration and discernment. They're our tools--and we need a full set. We need the discernment which comes with Right View, and the virtue which comes with self-discipline. Virtue is very important. Virtue and discernment are like our right and left hands. If one of our hands is dirty, it can't wash itself. You need to use both hands to keep both hands washed and clean. Thus wherever there is virtue, you have to have discernment. Wherever there is discernment, you have to have virtue. Discernment is what enables you to know; virtue is what enables you to let go, to relinquish, to destroy your addictions. Virtue isn't just a matter of the five or eight precepts, you know. It has to be dealt with the finest details. Whatever your discernment sees as a cause of suffering, you have to stop, to let go.

Virtue is something which gets very subtle and precise. Letting go, giving up, renouncing, abstaining, cutting away and destroying: All of these things are an affair of virtue. This is why virtue and discernment have to go together, just as our right and left hands have to help each other. They help each other wash away defilement. That's when your mind will be able to become centered, to be bright and clear. These things show their benefits right at the mind. If we don't have these tools, it's as if we had no hands or feet: We wouldn't be able to get anywhere at all. We have to use our tools--virtue and discernment--to destroy defilement. That's when our minds will benefit....

This is why the Buddha taught us to keep training in virtue, concentration and discernment. We have to keep fit in training these things. If we don't keep up the training as we should, our tools for extinguishing suffering and defilement won't be sharp, won't be of much use. They won't be a match for the defilements. The defilements have monstrous powers for burning our mind in the twinkling of an eye. Say that mind is quiet and neutral: The slightest sensory contact can set things burning in an instant by making us pleased or displeased. Why?

Sensory contact is our measuring stick for seeing how firm or weak our mindfulness is. Most of the time it stirs things up. As soon as there's contact by way of the ear or eye, the defilements are very quick. When this is the case, how can we keep things under control? How are we going to gain control over our eyes? How are we going to gain control over our ears, our nose, our tongue, our body and mind? How can we get mindfulness and discernment in charge of these things? This is a matter of practice, pure and simple...our own affair, something by which we can test ourselves, to see why defilements flare up so quickly when sensory contact takes place.

Say, for instance, that we hear someone criticizing someone else. We can listen and not get upset. But say that the thought occurs to us, "They're actually criticizing me." As soon as we concoct up this "me", we're immediately angry and displeased. If we concoct very much of this "me", we can get very angry. Just this fact should enable us to observe that as soon as our "self" gets involved, we suffer immediately. This is how it happens. If no sense of self comes out to get involved, we can remain calm and indifferent. When they criticize other people we can stay indifferent, but as soon as we conclude that they're criticizing us, our "self" appears and immediately gets involved--and we immediately burn with defilement. Why?

You have to pay close attention to this. As soon as your "self" arises, suffering arises in the very same instant. The same holds true even if you're just thinking. The "self" you think up spreads out into all sorts of issues. The mind gets scattered all over the place with defilement, craving and attachments. It has very little mindfulness and discernment watching over it, so it gets dragged all over the place by defilement and craving.

And yet we don't realize it. We think we're just fine. Is there anyone among us who realizes that this is what's happening? We're too weighted down, weighted down with our own delusions. No matter how much the mind is smothered in the defilement of delusion, we don't realize it, for it keeps us deaf and blind....

There are no physical tools you can use to detect or cure this disease of defilement, because it arises only at sensory contact. There's no substance to it. It's like a match in a matchbox. As long as the match doesn't come into contact with the friction strip on the side of the box, it won't give rise to fire. But as soon as we strike it against the side of the box, it bursts into flame. If it goes out right then, all that gets burned is the matchhead. If it doesn't stop at the matchhead, it'll burn the matchstick. If it doesn't stop with

the matchstick, and meets up with anything flammable, it can grow into an enormous fire.

When defilement arises in the mind, it starts from the slightest contact. If we can be quick to put it out right there, it's like striking a match which flares up--chae-- for an instant and then dies down right in the matchhead. The defilement disbands right there. But if we don't put it out the instant it arises, and let it start concocting issues, it's like pouring fuel into a fire.

We have to observe the diseases of defilement in our own minds to see what their symptoms are, why they are so quick to flare up. They can't stand to be disturbed. The minute you disturb them, they flare up into flame. When this is the case, what can we do to prepare ourselves beforehand? How can we stock up on mindfulness before sensory contact strikes?

The way to stock up is to practice meditation, as when we keep the breath in mind. This is what gets our mindfulness prepared, so that we can keep ahead of defilement, so that we can keep it from arising as long as we have our theme of meditation as an inner shelter for the mind.

The mind's outer shelter is the body, which is composed of physical elements, but its inner shelter is the theme of meditation we use to train its mindfulness to be focused and aware. Whatever theme we use, that's the inner shelter for the mind which keeps it from wandering around, concocting thoughts and imaginings. This is why we need a theme of meditation. Don't let the mind chase after its preoccupations the way ordinary people who don't meditate do. Once we have a meditation theme to catch this monkey of a mind so that day by day it becomes less and less willful, it will gradually calm down, calm down until it can stand firm for long or short periods, depending on how much we train and observe ourselves.

Now, as for how we do breath meditation: The texts say to breathe in long and out long--heavy or light--and then in short and out short, again heavy or light. Those are the first steps of the training. After that we don't have to focus on the length of the in-breath or out-breath. Instead, we simply gather our awareness at any one point of the breath, and keep this up until the mind settles down and is still. When the mind is still, you then focus on the stillness of the mind at the same time you're aware of the breath.

At this point you don't focus directly on the breath. You focus on the mind which is still and at normalcy. You focus continuously on the normalcy of the mind at the same time you are aware of the breath coming in and out, without actually focusing on the breath. You simply stay with the mind, but you watch it with each in-and-out breath. Usually when you are doing physical work and your mind is at normalcy, you can know what you're doing, so why can't you be aware of the breath? After all, it's part of the body.

Some of you are new at this, which is why you don't know how you can focus on the mind at normalcy with each in-and-out breath without focusing directly on the breath itself. What we're doing here is practicing how to be aware of the body and mind, pure and simple, in

and of themselves....

Start out by focusing on the breath for about 5, 10 or 20 minutes. Breathe in long and out long, or in short and out short. At the same time, notice the stages in how the mind feels, how it begins to settle down when you have mindfulness watching over the breath. You've got to make a point of observing this, because usually you breathe out of habit, with your attention far away. You don't focus on the breath, you're not really aware of it. This leads you to think that it's hard to stay focused there, but actually it's very easy. After all, the breath comes in and out on its own, by its very nature. There's nothing at all difficult about breathing. It's not like other themes of meditation. For instance, if you're going to practice recollection of the Buddha, or buddho, you have to keep on repeating buddho, buddho, buddho.

Actually, if you want, you can repeat buddho in the mind with each in-and-out breath, but only in the very beginning stages. You repeat buddho to keep the mind from concocting thoughts about other things. Simply by keeping up this repetition you can weaken the mind's tendency to stray, for the mind can take on only one object at a time. This is something you have to observe. The repetition is to prevent the mind from thinking up thoughts and clambering after them.

After you've kept up the repetition--you don't have to count the number of times--the mind will settle down to be aware of the breath with each in-and-out breath. It will begin to be still, neutral and at normalcy.

This is when you focus on the mind instead of the breath. Let go of the breath and focus on the mind--but still be aware of the breath on the side. You don't have to make note of how long or short the breath is. Make note of the mind which stays at normalcy with each in-and-out breath. Remember this carefully so that you can put it into practice.

The posture: For focusing on the breath, sitting is a better posture than standing, walking or lying down, because the sensations that come with the other postures often overcome the sensations of the breath. Walking jolts the body around too much, standing for a long time can make you tired, and if the mind settles down when you're lying down, you tend to fall asleep. With sitting it's possible to stay in one position and keep the mind firmly settled for a long time. You can observe the subtleties of the breath and the mind naturally and automatically.

Here I'd like to condense the steps of breath meditation to show how all four of the tetrads mentioned in the texts can be practiced at once. In other words, is it possible to focus on the body, feelings, the mind and the Dhamma all in one sitting? This is an important question for all of us. You could, if you wanted to, precisely follow all the steps in the texts so as to develop strong powers of mental absorption (jhana), but it takes a lot of time. It's not appropriate for those of us who are old and have only a little time left.

What we need is a way of gathering our awareness at the breath long enough to make the mind firm, and then go straight to examining how

all formations are inconstant, stressful and not-self, so that we can see the truth of all formations with each in-and-out breath. If you can keep at this continually, without break, your mindfulness will become firm and snug enough for you to give rise to the discernment which will enable you to gain clear knowledge and vision.

So what follow are the steps in practicing a condensed form of breath meditation....Give them a try until you find they give rise to knowledge of your own within you. You're sure to give rise to knowledge of your very own.

The first thing when you are going to meditate on the breath is to sit straight and keep your mindfulness firm. Breathe in. Breathe out. Make the breath feel open and at ease. Don't tense your hands, your feet, or any of your joints at all. You have to keep your body in a posture that feels appropriate to your breathing. At the beginning, breathe in long and out long, fairly heavily, and gradually the breath will shorten--sometimes heavy and sometimes light. Then breathe in short and out short for about 10 or 15 minutes, and then change.

After a while, when you stay focused mindfully on it, the breath will gradually change. Watch it change for as many minutes as you like, then be aware of the whole breath, all of its subtle sensations. This is the third step, the third step of the first tetrad: sabba-kaya-patisamvedi--focusing on how the breath affects the whole body by watching all the breath sensations in all the various parts of the body, and in particular the sensations related to the in-and-out breath.

From there you focus on the sensation of the breath at any one point. When you do this right, and for a fairly long while, the body--the breath--will gradually grow still. The mind will grow calm. In other words, the breath grows still together with the awareness of the breath. When the subtleties of the breath grow still, at the same time that your undistracted awareness settles down, the breath grows even more still. All the sensations in the body gradually grow more and more still. This is the fourth step, the stilling of bodily formations.

As soon as this happens, you begin to be aware of the feelings which arise with the stilling of the body and mind. Whether they are feelings of pleasure or rapture or whatever, they will appear clearly enough for you to contemplate them.

The stages through which you have already passed--watching the breath come in and out, long or short--should be enough to make you realize--even though you may not have focused on the idea--that the breath is inconstant. It's continually changing, from in long and out long to in short and out short, from heavy to light and so forth. This should enable you to read the breath, to understand that there's nothing constant to it at all. It changes on its own from one moment to the next.

Once you have realized the inconstancy of the body, i.e of the breath, you'll be able to see the subtle sensations of pleasure and pain in the realm of feeling. So now you watch feelings, right there in the same place where you have been focusing on the breath. Even though

they are feelings which arise from the stillness of the body or mind, they are nevertheless inconstant even in that stillness. They can change. So these changing sensations in the realm of feeling exhibit inconstancy in and of themselves, just like the breath.

When you see change in the body, change in feelings and change in the mind, this is called seeing the Dhamma, i.e. seeing inconstancy. You have to understand this correctly. Practicing the first tetrad of breath meditation contains all four tetrads of breath meditation. In other words, you see the inconstancy of the body, and then contemplate feeling. You see the inconstancy of feeling, and then contemplate the mind. The mind, too, is inconstant. This inconstancy of the mind is the Dhamma. To see the Dhamma is to see this inconstancy.

When you see the true nature of all inconstant things, then keep track of that inconstancy at all times, with every in-and-out breath. Keep this up in all your activities to see what happens next.

What happens next is dispassion. Letting go. This is something you have to know for yourself.

This is what condensed breath meditation is like. I call it condensed because it contains all the steps all at once. You don't have to do one step at a time. Simply focus at one point: Focus on the body, and you'll see the inconstancy of the body. When you see the inconstancy of the body, you'll have to see feeling. Feeling will have to show its inconstancy. The mind's sensitivity to feeling, or its thoughts and imaginings, are also inconstant. All of these things keep on changing. This is how you know inconstancy....

If you can become skilled at looking and knowing in this way, you'll be struck with the inconstancy, stressfulness and not-selfness of your "self", and you'll meet with the genuine Dhamma. The Dhamma which is constantly changing like a burning fire, burning with inconstancy, stress and not-selfness, is the Dhamma of the impermanence of all formations. But further in, in the mind or in the property of consciousness, is something special, beyond the reach of any kind of fire. There, there is no suffering or stress of any kind at all. This thing which lies "inside": You could say that lies within the mind, but it isn't really in the mind. It's simply that the contact is there at the mind. There's no way that you can really describe it. Only the extinguishing of all defilement will lead you to know it for yourself.

This "something special" within exists by its very nature, but defilements have it surrounded on all sides. All these counterfeit things--the defilements--keep getting in the way and take possession of everything, so that this special nature remains imprisoned inside at all times. Actually, there is nothing in the dimension of time which can be compared with it. There's nothing by which you can label it, but it is something which you can pierce through to see--i.e. by piercing through defilement, craving and attachment into the state of mind which is pure, bright and silent. This is the only thing that's important.

But it doesn't have only one level. There are many levels, from the outer bark to the inner bark and on to the sapwood before you reach

the heartwood. The genuine Dhamma is like the heartwood, but there's a lot to the mind which isn't heartwood: The roots, the branches and leaves of the tree are more than many, but there's only a little heartwood. The parts which aren't heartwood will gradually decay and disintegrate, but the heartwood doesn't decay. That's one kind of comparison we can make. It's like a tree which dies standing. The leaves fall away, the branches rot away, the bark and sapwood rot away, leaving nothing but the true heartwood. That's one comparison we can make with this thing we call deathless, this property which has no birth, no death, no changing. We can also call it nibbana or the Unconditioned. It's all the same thing.

Now, then. Isn't this something worth trying to break through to see?...