

THICH NHAT HANH

Breathe! You are alive p. 55

The Sixth Subject of Full Awareness: Controlling and liberating the mind

I am breathing in and am aware of my mind.

I am breathing out and am aware of my mind.'

I am breathing in and making my mind happy and at peace.

I am breathing out and making my mind happy and at peace.'

I am breathing in and concentrating my mind.

I am breathing out and concentrating my mind.'

I am breathing in and liberating my mind.

I am breathing out and liberating my mind.'

Methods 9-12

The first four breathing methods help us become one with our breathing and drop all thinking, discriminating ideas, and imaginings.

The ninth method helps us identify the functions of the mind (other than the feelings, which were treated in methods seven and eight), such as perception, thinking, reasoning, discriminating, imagining, and all the activities of the subconscious as well. As soon as one of these psychological phenomena arises, we should identify it while breathing with awareness. We continue to observe it to see its connection with the whole of our mind.

Mind is a river of psychological phenomena which is always changing, being born and passing away. In this river, the arising, duration, and cessation of any phenomenon is always linked with the arising, duration, and cessation of all other phenomena. To know how to identify psychological phenomena as they arise and develop is an important part of meditation practice. The activities of our mind, often unstable and agitated, are like a torrent of water washing over the rocks. In traditional Buddhist literature, mind is often compared to a monkey which is always swinging from branch to branch or a horse galloping. Once our mind is able to identify what is happening, we will be able to see it clearly and make it calm, and we can feel peace and joy in its stillness.

The tenth breathing method is intended to calm the mind. Compare this with the fourth and eighth methods. The fourth is intended to calm the body, and the eighth is intended to calm the feelings. These three methods can bring us to the land of great bliss, to a state of joy, peace, and relaxation in meditative concentration. This state brings us ease and can nourish the power of our concentration. But we should not stop at this. We can continue by "observing to shed light on it," in order to arrive at an awakened understanding. Only awakened understanding can lead us to complete freedom.

The eleventh method aims at concentrating our mind on a single object. Only when we can concentrate steadily on an object can we observe it. This object can be a physiological phenomenon, such as the breath; a psychological phenomenon, such as a perception or a feeling; or a physical phenomenon, such as a leaf or a stone. All these phenomena are classified as "objects of mind" and they do not exist independently of mind. The object of the concentrated mind is lit up by the light of the mind's observation, like a singer in a spotlight on a stage. The object can be moving in time and space, since it is as alive as the mind which is observing it. In

the state of concentration, the subject and object have become one. Breathing is also an object of the concentrated mind. When we put all our attention on the breath, our mind follows that alone, and our mind and breath are one. That is concentration. Concentration is the vector of consciousness pointed at a single object. After practicing with the breath, we can practice with other physiological, psychological, and physical phenomena. Only if there is concentration can the work of observation be achieved.

The twelfth method aims at untying all the knots of the mind—the sorrows and memories of the past, the anxieties and predictions concerning the future, feelings of irritation, fear, and doubt in the present, or confusion created by inaccurate perceptions. Only by concentrating the mind do we have the capacity to observe and illumine, and be emancipated from obstacles. It is the same as when we try to take knots out of thread. We have to be calm, and we need to take time. By observing our mind in all its subtlety, in a calm and self-contained way, we can free our mind from all confusion.