

## *Training the Mind*

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Get your body into position, and then get the mind into position. Getting the body into position is relatively easy. Sit facing straight forward, your hands in your lap, your right hand on top of your left. Close your eyes, and there you are.

Getting the mind into position is easy as well. Just focus on your breath—nothing elaborate, nothing abstract, just the sensation of breathing in the present moment. You can focus on any spot in the body where there's a sensation that lets you know: Now the breath is coming in; now the breath is going out. It may be the movement of the air in the nose, the rising and falling of the chest, the rising and falling of the abdomen. You can focus anywhere that seems comfortable and where it's clear to see: Now the breath is coming in; now the breath is going out.

That's getting the mind into position. That part is easy. The hard part is getting it to stay, because it's used to checking in and then checking out very quickly to go someplace else. You find, as you meditate, that the mind is like a committee. There are many different ideas floating around in your mind about what you should be doing, and many different ways of making the decision on where you're going to focus.

Sometimes it seems as if part of your mind is with the breath, and part of your mind is looking for something else to do. You have to watch out for that. Realize that there's a very great likelihood that you're going to forget the breath, and go wandering someplace else. If you catch yourself doing that, just come back to the breath.

An important part of the skill of meditation is in *how* you come back. If you come back with a sense of frustration or irritation, you're not going to get far in the meditation. You have to be patient. The mind wanders off; you bring it back. It wanders off again; you bring it back again. Just keep this up. Be persistent without, at the same time, getting frustrated. Keep in mind the fact that you've been allowing the mind to wander for who knows how long. The Buddha calls this *samsara*.

*Samsara* takes place on two levels. There's the *samsara* of going from one lifetime to the next. But there's also just the *samsara* of the mind wandering around, checking this out and checking that out, thinking about this, thinking about that—going off in all kinds of thought worlds like little bubbles that float away and then pop. Then you have to come back. You've been doing this for a long time, so it's going to take a while to change your habits.

But there are ways to induce the mind to want to stay. One is to keep the breath as comfortable as possible. Experiment with your breathing right now to see what rhythm of breathing feels best. It could be in long and out long, or in short, out short. It's always good to start out with some long deep breaths to ventilate the body. Then, if long breathing doesn't feel good, you can change: in short, out short; in short, out long; in long, out short; deep or shallow; heavy, light; fast, slow; broad or narrow. There are lots of different ways of breathing. There's diaphragm breathing. There's shoulder breathing. Different parts of the body can get into the act, so you might experiment with that to see what works best.

As you create a sense of comfort in the present moment, the mind will be more likely to stay because, after all, we all like comfort. Everything we do is for the sake of happiness and ease. So here's one way of creating a sense of happiness and ease in the present moment.

Another way of helping the mind to stay in the present moment is to have a meditation word to go along with the breath. You can think *buddho*, which means "awake": *bud-* with the in-breath, *dho* with the out. That's the title the Buddha earned through his awakening. It means not only "awake," but also "blossoming." You want to develop a quality of awakeness, of the mind blossoming here in the present moment. So, the word *buddho* reminds you of what you're here working on. At times, when the breath seems too subtle to follow, you can keep up the repetition of *buddho*.

When the breath does get comfortable, though, it's important that you start expanding your sense of awareness in the body, because if you stay focused on any one spot and the breath gets more refined, more gentle, you lose it after a while. The mind can fall into what's like an air pocket for a second, and then you come out. So as the breath gets comfortable, think of that sense of comfort spreading through the body down through the nerves, down through the blood vessels, so that larger and larger parts of the body feel good as you breathe in. That enables you to stay in the present a lot more easily with a lot more steadiness and stability.

That's how you keep the mind in position. As for the question of, "What next?": Don't ask what's next. Just keep this up because this, in and of itself, is an important skill. You're developing lots of important qualities of mind as you do this, and they need to be strengthened over time—qualities like mindfulness and alertness. Mindfulness is what keeps things in mind; alertness is what keeps watch over what you're doing, and keeps watch over the results. You also want some ardency, which means that you really are paying attention to what you're doing and trying to do it well. When you're with the breath, you try to be as sensitive as

possible to how the breathing feels. When you find the mind wandering off, that sense of ardency means you want to bring the mind back to the breath as quickly as possible.

These three qualities enable you to establish mindfulness. As you're sticking with the breath in and of itself, you don't have to think about the breath in relation to anything else except the body sitting here right now. As for other issues, just let them go. Have a strong sense of how important it is to establish this foundation. Whether it takes a little time or a lot of time is not the issue. You've got to establish this foundation if you want to find any happiness in life.

We're looking for the kind of happiness that comes from a trained mind. The happiness that comes simply from experiencing sensual pleasures—sights that you like, sounds that you like, smells, tastes, tactile sensations—doesn't last very long. It comes and it goes. Often, you do a lot of unskillful things in order to keep those sensations coming back. So short-term happiness can easily lead to long-term suffering, which is a bad deal.

What you're looking for is something that leads to long-term happiness, and you do that by developing good qualities in the mind. In other words, you realize what's important is not so much what's coming *in* through the senses; it's how the mind processes them. That's your primary experience of the world—not the things coming in, but how you process things. How much mindfulness do you bring to it, how much alertness, how much ardency, how much concentration, how much discernment? You want to develop these qualities. It's like being a good cook. Mediocre cooks need to have really good ingredients in order to come out with good food. Great cooks can take almost anything and turn it into good food because they have a lot of skills. There was once a Vietnamese chef who said, "Give me a good bottle of fish sauce, and I'll make good food out of anything else you can give me." I have a friend who was once a professional cook, and he told how he made an excellent cream of asparagus soup out of garbage scraps.

In other words, a trained mind can take *anything* that comes in—good or bad, gain or loss, status, loss of status, praise, criticism, pleasure, pain—and turn it into good things, just as the Buddha did. He took pain and turned it into a noble truth. Instead of trying to run away from pain, he said that once the mind is well-trained, you can face pain square on. You realize the best way to deal with it is not to push it away or try to run away from it, but to try to comprehend it.

Comprehending pain requires good, solid concentration, good discernment, a strong sense of endurance—all the qualities you develop as you're working with the breath here. In that way, having a trained mind turns pain from something to be avoided or feared into something to study, to explore. And through exploring

it, it leads you to awakening. That's the good cook, taking even the worst things in life—aging, illness, death, separation—and turning them into fodder for awakening.

This is why we have to train the mind. If our happiness depends on things being the way we like, it's going to come and go as they come and go. And it's going to turn us into very weak and fearful people. This is how they've turned this society into such a fearful society. Everybody's hooked on sensual pleasures, and the idea that we're going to lose our sensual pleasures drives everybody crazy. In this way, other people can manipulate us very easily. But if we train ourselves so that we can deal with anything that gets thrown at us, then what is there to fear? When there's nothing to fear, how can we be controlled? We're free. We can handle any situation that comes our way because the mind has found a source for happiness that doesn't depend on conditions. That's the goal of the practice.

It's in this way that our happiness becomes secure. We can rely on it because we've learned how to rely on ourselves—the way we process information and the skills that we've developed in the mind. They start with simple things like this: being able to stay with one thing and make the most of it. After all, what could be more simple than the breath? What's more basic than the breath? And yet, the Buddha was able to base his quest for awakening on the breath. So, what's the difference between his breath and yours? Not that much. The difference lies in the qualities of mind he brought to the breath, and that's what we want to work on.

Use your ingenuity to make the breath comfortable and make it interesting. You're not going to stay with it simply out of brute force or brute willpower, so learn some ingenuity in learning how to keep the mind right here, right now. This way, you develop all kinds of good qualities of mind. Then when you turn these qualities to other aspects in life, you find that you're coming from a position of strength, a position of skill. You find you can depend on yourself more and more.

This is why, as the Buddha said, the trained mind is what leads to happiness. He also said that this is the difference between a wise person and a fool: The wise person sees that, for true happiness, you need to train the mind. The fool doesn't see that. The fool just wants things to be this way, sights and sounds to be that way, wants people to be this or that way, and then goes messing around with the world, trying to arrange it to suit his or her pleasure. It doesn't work.

Then the fool continues to blame the world. The wise person realizes, "Oh! The problem is in how you train the mind." So try to spend the rest of the hour being wise. Develop the qualities of mind you need in order to stay with the breath, and you'll find that they carry you a long way.