

Start by Relaxing Your Hands

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Get the body in a comfortable position, and try to relax your legs and your arms. You might want to make a survey starting with your fingers and going up through your hands, the wrist, the elbow, the shoulder, relaxing all the joints. Then do the same with the feet, starting with the toes, going up through the feet, the ankles, the knees, the hips, the spine, the head: Relax the joints, and then from that relaxed attitude focus on the breath. Know when the breath is coming in, know when it's going out. Try not to force it. Remember to keep your legs, keep your arms, keep your hands, keep your feet relaxed, as you breathe in, as you breathe out. That helps to establish a good rhythm for the breathing, because you'll be able to tell at what point the breath starts getting too long. Things begin to tense up, and you don't want to tense up. Let the breath out. And again, don't push it out too far. Find just the right rhythm for the breathing that allows you to keep your hands and your feet relaxed all way through.

You can focus on the breath in any part of the torso or your nose, the neck, anywhere in the body. The effort here is simply in staying with the breath. In the beginning, you find that you'll probably tense up around the breath in one way or other, but try to minimize it.

Once you catch yourself tensing up, relax. When you've found a good rhythm, stick with it until it doesn't feel good anymore. You're not committed to staying with the same rhythm all the way through the hour. Notice in what ways the breathing needs of the body change, and allow the breath to adjust accordingly. It's not a physical effort here so much as a mental effort—sticking with it, trying to be as continuously aware of the breath as possible—because the continuity is what allows the mind to settle down and have a sense of ease. It doesn't have to jump all around all over the place, because it's got a good home right here. You're making it more comfortable than home. And all you have to do is just keep it comfortable.

An important part of the meditation is finding an object that really pleases you, that you like, because it's something you're going to stay with for long periods of time. You want something that not only feels good but also engages the mind. It's interesting to notice how the breathing energy can affect your mood, how it can affect your general sense of the body. Even when you're feeling a little bit sick, if you breathe in the right way, the body can feel a lot stronger, a lot healthier.

So the breath is chosen as the object of meditation not only because it can be pleasant, but also because it's got a lot of potentials. If you start getting interested in the potentials, you'll find that they can do a lot, both for the state of the body and for the state of the mind. In this way, your meditation isn't simply a process of forcing the mind to stay with the breath. As you get more and more interested, the element of force gets placed off to the side because you want to explore, you want to learn.

Different issues come up in life, and you can ask yourself: How can simply breathing in a different way help the issue? Whether it's an inability to concentrate, or you're in a tense situation with somebody else, or a boring situation with somebody else, whatever, how can the breath help? It's something right close by and it's got lots of potentials that we normally don't appreciate.

So take the opportunity to learn about them. Notice how the breathing process feels in different parts the body: how it feels in the abdomen, how it feels in the chest, in your neck, in your head, going down the back. It's actually a whole-body process, which is why it helps to keep your hands and your feet and your legs and your arms as relaxed as possible throughout, because as these parts of the body relax, they help the rest of the body—your back, your stomach, your shoulders, your chest—to relax as well. That provides a different environment for the mind. You find that its thoughts change, its moods change because it's not being squeezed by tension in the body.

So the effort here is purely a mental effort. When the Buddha talks about right effort, it has nothing do with how many hours you sit or how many hours of walking meditation you do. Right effort is simply noticing which attitudes of the mind are skillful and which ones are unskillful, then trying consistently to encourage the skillful ones and let go of the unskillful ones. And you notice very quickly as you sit here, it's not just a matter of the mind. The way you hold the body can also be skillful or unskillful, in the sense that it has an effect on the mind. The way you breathe can be skillful or unskillful.

So right effort means an effort that's appropriately focused. It's not a matter how much effort you're putting in, but of how skillful you are at sensing what's helpful and what's not helpful, and being able to develop the helpful qualities.

There are four qualities that are really helpful here when you do this. The first one is desire. This may seem strange, as often we're taught that the whole purpose of the practice is to get beyond desire—and it is, in the ultimate stage. But as a means to that end, you need to have the desire to get there. Once you get there, then the desire will end. But in the meantime, you want to use the desire to get there to help you along. But do this strategically. Don't get overly focused on what

you want out of the meditation. Realize that the meditation is a process of cause and effect. So you're going to focus on the causes.

It's like cooking. If all you can think about is eating, then you're not paying careful attention to what you're doing. The food may burn, or you may forget an ingredient because you're not paying careful attention to the steps that'll take you to the food you want. So focus on the steps, one by one by one, and the food you want will come as a result.

So in this case, even though we're trying to get the mind into a state of concentration, don't be concerned about whether it's concentrated or not, just be concerned with staying focused on how the breath feels right now, in the context of the body. Make sure it's got its hand and its feet relaxed, its arms and its legs relaxed. Don't try to push through the steps so that you can get the results. It's in the steps that the results come. So keep your desires focused here.

The next quality is persistence. This means sticking with it, all way through the in-breath, all way through the out, and the next breath, and the next breath. Just keep with each breath as it comes, and a momentum will build up. As the mind gets more and more used to being here, you relax more into the breath, relax more into the meditation posture. It's like doing yoga. You take your stance and you find for the first few seconds there's still some stiffness or tension in the body, but as you relax into the stance, as you give yourself enough time to relax into the stance, the effect goes deeper.

It's the same with the mind. If you stick with this one task of staying with the breath over time, you relax more into the breath, relax more into the way the body feels right now from the inside. Things open up more and more as you get more and more sensitive to more and more subtle levels of tension that you probably didn't notice at the very beginning of the session. This is what allows the mind to settle in, further and further: i.e., giving it time and being observant.

Being observant is the next quality. You want to be really intent on watching what you're doing. Try to notice how things are going, so that you're not just sloughing through or going through the motions. It's in your alertness to what you're doing with each breath that makes all the difference. So be observant to see if the breath is going well. Be observant to see when the mind is staying with the breath or if it's beginning to stray. Watch out for the warning signs that the mind is getting ready to go. If you don't watch out for that, you suddenly find yourself off in San Francisco, New York, Hong Kong, Australia, England, Norway, the Canary Islands, and you wonder how you got there.

It was because your alertness lapsed; your mindfulness lapsed. But it's not the case that these things suddenly lapse without warning. There are warning signals.

So learn to look for them. The mind may be getting a little bit bored, it may be getting a little bit impatient, it may want some immediate gratification right now, so it starts casting around for someplace else to go. Even while still with the breath, part of it is getting ready to leap off someplace else, like an inchworm at the edge of a leaf, waiting for another leaf to come nearby, so that it can, *bup!* go off to the next leaf.

So when you sense the mind beginning to get antsy like this, note it and then try to get more into the breath. Ask yourself: Are there other parts of the body where there's still tension, that are uncomfortable? Are you keeping a tightness, say, in your back or in your chest? Try to notice that. Let it go and you'll find the mind at that point being more willing to settle back in.

This connects with the fourth quality, which is your ability to analyze things in terms of cause and effect. If you notice things aren't going well, ask yourself, "What can I do to make it go better?" This kind of thinking is absolutely necessary to the practice. You evaluate what you're doing; you evaluate the results. You want to see the connection between cause and effect, because this is how insight arises. It's not the case that insight is going to arise at the very end of the practice, only after you've fully mastered concentration. The insight arises in the process of mastering the concentration as you get more sensitive to your own actions and results they give.

This also means using your ingenuity. If you've gone through all your bag of tricks and things aren't still going well, ask yourself, what would be a better solution? What other ways of conceiving the breath would be helpful? You can think of the breath coming in through the back, you can think of it coming in through the soles of your feet, in through the palms of your hands, you can think of it coming in and out your eyes or ears. Play with your perceptions and you find that that helps things along.

It also helps you to begin to question some of the perceptions you've been bringing into the practice. Exactly how does the breath come in anyhow? What is breath energy? What pulls the breath in? What pushes it out? Does it have to be pulled? Does it have to be pushed? Start questioning things like this and you're laying the foundation for insight.

These four qualities—desire, persistence, intentness, and your powers of analysis—are called the bases for success. They're the qualities that underlie any kind of success in your meditation. They allow concentration to develop and to be mastered as a skill. They're actually qualities that would apply to any skill you'd like to master. You have to want to get the results, and you also have to want to do all the things that are needed to be done. If you're going to learn how to play the

piano, you have to learn how to want to do the practice exercises, want to play the scales. Then you stick with it. And you find ways of encouraging yourself to stick with it, so it doesn't get dry. You pay careful attention; you listen to the way you play. If you don't like the way your playing sounds, well, try to figure out ways of making it better.

There you are: desire, persistence, intentness, and powers of analysis. These four qualities bring success in any skill, but especially in the skills of meditation, because concentration depends on them, and the insight you're going to develop from the concentration depends on them as well.

So there is effort in the meditation. You have goals in the meditation. But the effort involves working with the ease in the body, with a sense of patience, knowing that if you do the steps well, you'll get to the end. If you try to skip over the steps to get to the end more quickly, you find you've gotten lost.

So value each breath. When you catch yourself slipping off the breath, value the fact that you caught yourself, come back to the breath, and learn how to appreciate the steps that are required. It's only in the steps that the goal is found, that success is attained.

Keep these qualities in mind always. When things aren't going well in the meditation, ask yourself which quality is missing and then do what you can to make up the lack.