

## *A Meditation Karma Checklist*

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Meditation is a type of karma, skillful karma. Of course, the more skillfully you do it, the more desirable the results are going to be. It can either be the kind of karma that leads to good results that you'll experience in this lifetime, to a good rebirth, or it can be the kind of karma, as the Buddha said, that leads to the end of karma. In other words, it takes you to the deathless—depending how it's done and what other factors of the path you combine it with.

It's useful to look at it from the point of view as a type of karma because the Buddha provides lots of different ways of analyzing karma both in the Dhamma and in the Vinaya. They can provide useful checklists for when the meditation is not going right. You can ask yourself: What's missing? What aspect is going wrong?

The Vinaya has an interesting way of analyzing actions that can be very usefully applied to the meditation, especially when you're trying to figure out what's going wrong with your meditation. In the Vinaya, it's a system for deciding whether a particular action was harmful; if it was, how seriously harmful it was; and whether the monk who committed the offence can actually be held responsible. Now, when you're meditating, you're not doing anything offensive or harmful, but the different factors that can go into an action are all present, and they can all go awry.

So it's good to have a checklist to ask yourself what's missing or going off track so that you can bring things back onto track. The five factors for an offence are: 1) the intention; 2) the object; 3) the effort—the actual action you do; 4) the perception; and then 5) the result. In the Vinaya, for example, suppose you kill an animal, but you didn't intend to. Then it's not an offence. Or if you intentionally stepped on something, perceiving it to be not an animal, but it turns out it was an animal: Again it's not an offence. So that's a case where the perception makes a difference. In the first case, the intention makes a difference.

When you apply this same system of analysis to the meditation, start first with the intention. Sometimes you're here because you really do want to get the mind to settle down and you want to be clear about it. Other times, your intention is simply to have a nice restful hour, in which case the meditation is going to come out differently. As soon as you find a nice restful spot, you'll stay there either with some alertness, or if you really want to rest, you let go of the alertness and go into delusion concentration.

This is why the ajaans always say at the very beginning of each meditation session to make sure that your intention is clear. We're here not just to rest. The mind will rest, but it's resting for a purpose. And you want it to rest in a certain way—a way that's alert—because the purpose of resting here is so that you can gain some insight into what the mind is doing and where it's causing unnecessary suffering. So that's the intention you want to have in place.

Then there's the object of your meditation. Generally, it's the breath. As Ajaan Lee said, make the breath your home base. So make sure that you really are with the breath. Now, you may discover that the mind has other problems. Sometimes it's having problems with lust, so switch over to the 32 parts of the body. If you're having problems with ill will for somebody, okay, try to develop goodwill. In other words, try to choose an object that's right for the state of the mind you're experiencing right now. But in general, the breath is home base. That's where you want to keep coming back to.

Then there's the effort. This means really paying attention to the breath and trying to be on top of the mind when it begins to wander off. Be really intent on what you're doing. Don't just go through the motions. If the breath gets mechanical and your awareness gets mechanical, pretty quickly you're going to lose interest.

So remind yourself that you're here to really experience the breath as it goes through the body—in this case, all the actions that the Buddha describes in the very beginning steps of breath meditation. Discern short breathing. Discern long breathing. From there, you can discern other variations in the breath. Then be aware of the whole body as you breathe in and breathe out. There's an effort you have to exert to maintain that sense of whole body awareness. Then you calm the fabrication of the body. In other words, you calm the way the breath has an impact on the body.

These are things you choose to do. Always have it clearly in mind what you're going to be doing. Otherwise, you sit here and the mind wanders there a bit, wanders back, comes here, goes there, deals with the pain here, deals with something else there. In other words, it's pretty desultory. It doesn't have a clear notion of the steps it has to go through. So remind yourself that there are steps. Try to be very clear about where you are in the steps.

I was talking with someone last night who was saying that he's always had trouble figuring out, when the meditation went well, what he'd been doing leading up to the point where the mind was very still. That was because his attention was random and just happened to hit the jackpot. It's when you're more methodical that you can remember, "Oh, I was doing this, this, this, and then the

mind settled down.” That’s how the meditation becomes a skill, when you know the steps. You know what you’re supposed to do. There will be variations from one night to the next, but they’re not infinite. You begin to get a sense of the range of what kind of states the mind gets into and what you need to do to corral them back to get everything settled down. That’s the effort.

Then there’s the perception. What perception of the breath are you holding in mind? What perception of the mind are you holding in mind? Where are you, for example, in your body right now? It’s best to hold in mind the perception that there’s already awareness all the way throughout the body. In other words, there’s an awareness of your foot in the foot. There’s an awareness of your hand in the hand, and so on.

Sometimes we have the perception that we’re up in the head, looking at the rest of the body. Then we try to push that head awareness into everything else, and that gets everything all confused. Instead, have the perception that the awareness of the body is already full, simply that you should allow everything to come out and show itself. You don’t want any one part of the body to block out other parts of the body. That’s your perception of the mind.

This issue also applies to when there’s pain. You can ask yourself: Which side of the pain are you on? Are you on top on it, or are you beneath it? Are you on both sides? Ideally, you should be on both sides of the pain. You can work with it more easily that way.

Then, of course, there’s the perception of the breath as an energy—not so much the air coming in and out through the nose, but an energy that suffuses the body. It goes down the nerves; it goes down the blood vessels; it suffuses through all the muscles of the body. That way, when you’re breathing in, it’s not so much that you’re trying to push energy or force the breath into a solid lump. You’re simply allowing the energies to connect, so that the energy of the breath comes in and suffuses and swells the other energies. Then when you breathe out, you don’t have to squeeze things out. Allow everything to remain full even as you breathe out. This is how rapture can develop. If you squeeze everything out with the out-breath, well, how is rapture going to develop? How can there be any sense of fullness?

So you hold a perception of fullness as you breathe in and as you breathe out, with the energy flowing in and out like the tides. You find that the mind has a much easier time of settling down—because that’s the fifth factor: the results. How is it going? Are you getting what you wanted to begin with? In other words, are you getting the mind to settle down? Are you getting the quality of alertness

that you wanted? If the results aren't what you want, what should you go back and change in terms of your intention, your object, your effort, or your perception?

These are the five aspects of the meditation that you can use as a checklist. What's your original intention? Make sure that the intention is to settle down and be clear, to develop a sense of stillness that's alert. Choose the object that's right for you right now. And be very clear on the fact that even though we're here trying to get the mind into right concentration, you can have all kinds of thoughts about jhana—this level of jhana, that level of jhana—don't make the jhana the object of your meditation. The object is going to be the breath.

So don't just sit there engaging in hopes about what you want to be the object. The object has to be: What is the sensation of the breath coming in and out of the body right now? Content yourself with being there, just with the sensation.

That moves into the effort to be mindful, alert, and ardent, really making sure that you stay with that sensation. Hold the perception in mind that helps you there. And the results are going to be what you want.

All these factors apply whether the object is the breath or whatever object you're choosing for the evening. So it's a useful checklist. It keeps reminding you that when you hit certain states in the meditation that seem very large and expansive, even they are the results of action. These things, too, are fabricated. Some people get into a state of enlarged awareness and think it's the unfabricated or the unconditioned, and they've totally forgotten that they did something to create that experience. There was a perception that kept it going. There was an intention. They had focused on an object. They put effort in. This was the result of all that. If you can remember these factors, then it's very easy not to fall for these states.

So keep remembering that concentration is a kind of karma. It's a karma you want to develop as a skill whether it's simply for the good results it's going to bring in this lifetime in having a more steady and reliable mind, or for results in future lifetimes. When you've developed these skills, they can be really helpful when you have to leave the body. If you decide you want to go beyond another round of rebirth—you want to try something more transcendent—well, the concentration is the karma that leads you there, too.

This is one of the reasons the Buddha talks about karma. He doesn't give a complete theory about how everything happens in the world and can be traced back to particular actions. He teaches karma to the extent that it's useful in getting the mind to be trained so that it can put an end to suffering.

That's as far as his teaching goes, but that's pretty far. It's much better than having a map to everything but still suffering. So use these teachings to take you where you want to go because they can take you farther than you can imagine.