

Basics

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September 10, 2003

The first step when you meditate is to get your body into position: your right leg on top of your left, your hands in your lap, your right hand on top of your left. Sit up straight, look straight ahead of you, and then close your eyes. That's the body in position.

The next step is to get the mind in position. Start with thoughts of goodwill, because that's why we're here. Goodwill is the wish for happiness – both for your own happiness and for the happiness of everybody else. This is what we're working on as we meditate: We're taking that wish and we're working on it, looking for a way to bring true happiness to ourselves and to the people around us. Spread thoughts of goodwill first to yourself and then out in ever-widening circles to people who are close to your heart, people you know well and like, people you're more neutral about, and even people you don't like. Don't let there be any limitation on your goodwill, because that's a limitation on your own mind, on your own happiness. At the same time, think about it: If everyone in the world could find true happiness, the world would be a much better place. No one would have any reason to harm anyone else.

With that thought, spread thoughts of goodwill to people you don't even know – and not just people: all living beings of all kinds, east, west, north, south, above, and below, out to infinity. May we all find true happiness.

The next step is to bring your awareness back to the present moment. What have you got here? You've got the body sitting here breathing, and you've got the mind thinking and aware. So bring all those things together. Think about the breath and then be alert to the breath: What's the breath doing right now? Is it coming in? Is it going out? Where do you sense it coming in? Where do you sense it going out?

For the time being, put aside any preconceived notions you may have about where the breath comes in and where it goes out. Just notice how it actually feels – because breathing is not just air coming in and out of the lungs; it's the whole process, the whole energy flow by which the body brings the air in and expels it. And that's not just a matter of the nose and lungs. The entire nervous system can be involved. Different parts of the body expand and contract to bring in the air. That's all counted as part of the breathing process. So wherever you're most aware of the breathing process, focus your attention there. Try to make that spot comfortable. You can do this by adjusting the length of the breath, the width, the depth of the breath – whether it's fast or slow, heavy or light – whatever ways you have of adjusting the rhythm and texture of the breath so

that your sensation of the breathing feels good. That's getting the mind in position.

Now the problem with both the mind and the body in position is how to keep them there. It's not that difficult to get them into position, but to *keep* them there: That takes effort. And particularly the mind, because the mind is so used to running around. The body can sit here perfectly still, yet in the course of five minutes the mind could have gone around the world many, many times.

So this is the point you have to focus on most. In fact, all the real issues are in the mind. Even when there's pain in the body, the body itself doesn't really object to the pain; it doesn't mind. The mind is what gets upset by the pain. So you have to work mainly with the mind here. If it wanders off, just bring it right back. If it wanders off again, bring it back again. Try not to get frustrated with it, try not to get discouraged. It's used to wandering, so you have to accept it as normal that the mind is going to wander. Your duty right now is to catch it as quickly as you can and to bring it back without a lot of recrimination—just gently, but firmly, bring it back to the breath.

And let the breath be as comfortable as possible. The more comfortable it is, the less likely the mind will be to wander off. In fact, if you get the breath really comfortable, it becomes really absorbing. Explore where in the body you feel the different parts of the breathing sensations, the breathing process. Which parts of the body feel tense? If you want, you can survey the whole body, starting from the top of the head on down, or starting at the navel and going up the front of the body then down the back and out the legs, and beginning again at the back of the neck to go out the arms. Notice how the different parts of the body are or are not involved in the breathing process. Notice where you feel tension related to the breath. If you feel any tension anywhere, let it relax, let it dissolve away, so that no new tension builds up with the in-breath, and you don't hang on to any tension with the out. This way you make the breathing a lot more interesting. Then choose whichever part of the body you find congenial, and settle down there.

As for pains, at this stage of the game you don't have to focus on them. If there's a pain in the leg, just let it be in the leg. You don't have to be down there in the leg with it. You can stay in any other part of the body where the breathing feels comfortable—that's your choice. And be careful not to tense up around the pain. Remember that the breath is a whole-body process. When the breathing is comfortable, the breath energy can go through all the nerves and right through any pain there may be, so that you don't compound the pain by tensing up around it.

Try to develop a sense of wanting to be here, of liking to be here. Try to make the breath your friend. Often, when you're meditating and things don't seem to be going well, the object of your meditation seems to become your adversary. It's the hardest thing to focus on and it seems to keep wanting to slip away. But that's not the case at all. That's your own misperception. If you make friends

with the breath, it's a lot easier to stay here. Beings friends means, first, trying to sense as precisely as possible what it really feels like, as opposed to your preconceived notions of what it should feel like or where you should feel it. In other words, *listen* to the breath. And then, second, allow the breath to get more comfortable. These are basic principles in establishing any kind of friendship: Listen to the other person, allow the other person to feel at ease and at home, and soon the other person will start opening up.

The same with the breath: The breath energy in the body has lots to offer. On the physical side, it can relieve a lot of stress, a lot of diseases associated with stress. On the mental side, it can create a sense of ease and belonging here in the present moment so that you enjoy being right here just breathing in and breathing out. When you get on more friendly terms with the breath, and the breath becomes your friend, then you're more inclined to want to stay, to see what you can learn from the breath. That's the first step in having the meditation go well.

There are actually four steps altogether – although maybe it's better not to think of them as steps. There are four component factors in the mental attitude you should bring to the meditation to make it go well. They're called bases of success.

The first one is simply the desire to do the meditation, wanting to do it, being inclined to do it. If you find that your mind isn't inclined, step back and reason with it. Think of the importance of training the mind. Here it is, the major factor in your life, and if it's untrained it's like giving your car over to a wild, crazy person to drive. You have no idea where the crazy person is going to take that car, whether he's going to run off the road and into somebody, because you have no control over him. It's the same with your mind – the mind that shapes your life. If you have no control over it, you don't know where it's going to take you.

So as we're meditating we're trying to develop a measure of control. Not the sort of control of control freaks, but the control of someone who's intelligent in knowing how to administer and manage things so that the mind feels happy to do what really should be done. That requires mindfulness; it requires alertness. And those are precisely the qualities we're developing as we meditate.

The mind is the chief producer of all the happiness and suffering we experience in the world. That's why, when the Buddha gave his first sermon, started out with the issue of suffering. That, he said, is the big problem in life. And it's to be solved right here, in the mind in the present moment, because the suffering isn't something coming from outside. The real problem in life is the suffering that comes from craving. And you can't work on craving until you're really mindful and alert, and have the steady concentration that allows you to look at it calmly to see it in action.

So those are the qualities we're developing as we meditate: mindfulness, alertness, concentration, the ability to see things clearly as the mind grows more still. So even though we haven't quite gotten there yet in our meditation, at least

we're working in that direction. And the more you sense the importance of these qualities, the more you strengthen your desire to meditate.

Once that desire is in place, the next step is just to stick with it. Persistence is the second base of success. Just keep at your task. If the mind slips off, bring it back. If it slips off again, just bring it back again. If it slips off ten times, a hundred times, bring it back ten times, a hundred times. Don't give up. Don't get discouraged.

Remember that this is a task that nobody else can do for you. We suffer in life because of our own lack of skill in dealing with sights and sounds and smells and tastes and ideas that come our way. And because it's our own lack of skill, we're the ones who have to overcome that lack by developing more skillfulness in how we manage our minds. If we don't do it, nobody can do it for us. And if we don't do it now, when is it going to get done? Are you going to wait until you're older? That doesn't help. On the one hand, even if you do live to a ripe old age, the mind gets more and more difficult to train the older you get. And then of course there's the question of whether or not you're going to live that long. You've got the opportunity to meditate now, so go ahead and do it. Make the most of it each moment you have the chance. That's persistence.

The third base of success is intentness: You really focus on what you're doing; you give it your full attention. In the case of the breath, this means noticing when it's too long, when it's too short, when it's too heavy, when it's too light. The more careful your attention, the more sensitive you are – and the more you start to see here. You also try to be attentive to the mind. Pay attention to what kind of breathing really helps the mind to settle down, what kind of breathing doesn't. Once you notice that, you can make changes. In other words, be observant. Watch carefully what's happening, and make adjustments. The more sensitive you are to what's going on, the more you're going to see, and at the same time, the more the mind will be willing to settle down.

The fourth base of success is *vimamsa*, the one that's most difficult to translate. It covers the mind's ability to discern, its ability to be ingenious – in other words, all the qualities of active intelligence. If you see that something is not working in your meditation, use your imagination to figure out another approach that'll get better results. You can make the breath deeper, you can make it more shallow, you can make it come in and out different spots in the body. There's a lot to play around with here.

Sometimes you have to use auxiliary meditation topics to help you. If you're having a problem with anger, work on goodwill and equanimity. There are meditation topics that help foster those qualities. If you're having a problem with lust and desire, contemplate the body in terms of its parts. Notice that when you're attracted to a body, it's not the whole body you're attracted to. It's only certain parts. If you took the whole body into your mind, inside and out, you'd find it really difficult to get attracted to it. If you're feeling lazy, you can start thinking about death. As I said earlier, you have no idea how much longer you're going to

live. The only thing that's for sure is that you've got this opportunity right now, so take advantage of it.

These are ways of thinking that get the mind directed back to its work. They're ways of using your powers of intelligence, your powers of ingenuity, to see what works to bring the mind to the present moment. Once you've got it there, you can focus on the breath again. Treat the breath as home base, and other topics simply as means of bringing you home when you've wandered off course.

When you've got all these qualities together – your desire to meditate, your persistence, intentness, and your powers of ingenuity and intelligence – you find that the meditation grows; it develops. It starts showing results.

Notice that desire does have a role in this. Sometimes people say that when you meditate you shouldn't have any desires – you should just be in the present moment, allowing whatever comes up to come, without any idea of “progress” at all. The Buddha never taught meditation that way. At all. The whole point of the practice is that it *is* a path; it *goes* someplace. That someplace is right here into the present moment, but there is progress in terms of what you see, develop, and abandon here in the present moment. And desire does play a role in that seeing, developing, and abandoning – as do all the other qualities: intentness, persistence, ingenuity, the mind's ability to see what works and what doesn't work. It's simply a matter of learning how to use these mental qualities in a way that's helpful. Like desire: We've all had the experience of focusing on the goals we want in our meditation and then discovering that our desire gets in the way. Well, the solution is not to drop the desire; it's to learn how to focus the desire in a way that's more useful. Focus on the causes that are going to get you there.

Think of yourself as driving to a mountain on the horizon. If you spend all your time focusing on the mountain, you're going to drive off the road. So what do you do? You don't give up your desire to go to the mountain. You stay focused on the road. Every now and then you glance up to make sure that you're headed in the direction of the mountain, and that the mountain hasn't appeared in your rear-view mirror. But your main focus should be on what you're doing right now. Once you focus your desire here, make your desire more mindful, more alert – not in a general sense, but more precisely mindful right now, more precisely alert right now. And then the next moment, and then the next.

Try to focus your desire on making the practice continuous. As I said, the problem is not getting in position; it's staying in position. That's what you've got to work with here. And you do that by being mindful of the breath, alert to the breath, more continually. Once you focus your desire properly, it becomes an aid to the meditation and not an obstacle.

The same goes for the other qualities. Sometimes your effort can push, push, push so hard that it gets in the way of any kind of progress. So step back. Then it doesn't become a matter of not pushing; you just learn where to push – what things to push, what things to let be. In other words, you take these four bases for

success and refine them. You learn through experience how to master them as aids to the meditation.

Sometimes ingenuity, or thinking processes, can get carried away as you get too abstract in analyzing things. When that happens, step back and be ingenious about what you're doing right now. Analyze what you're doing right now, what the results are. Don't go beyond what's happening right now, what you're doing right now.

That way these qualities become focused, they become a part of the meditation. They help your meditation succeed. Ordinarily we don't like to think in terms of success in meditation. There's so much pressure to succeed in the material area that we don't want to hear about standards for success in the area of the Dhamma. But if you're serious about putting an end to suffering, the issue of success is something you can't avoid. When you approach the meditation skillfully, you get results. Your efforts have succeeded. They're actually accomplished something. That's the whole point.

So if you find that things aren't working in the meditation, it's because one of these qualities isn't properly focused. Either your desire to be with the breath is flagging; or you're not being as consistently persistent, breath after breath after breath; or you're not really paying attention – you're just going through the motions; or you're not using your analytical powers to see what's wrong, what could be changed if something has to be changed, or see where you're trying to push change too much. Use your powers of analysis to watch over all four of these qualities – to see what's unbalanced, what's unfocused – and then figure out how to put things into shape. Once you've got these qualities working together on the meditation, there will have to be progress. There are no two ways about it.

In Thailand they like to take these qualities as a guide to how you progress in *anything*, how you succeed in anything. To succeed in school, to succeed in business, you need the desire to succeed, you need to be persistent, to be intent, to use your powers of analysis and ingenuity. If you apply those qualities to *any* task, you're sure to succeed.

And what do you succeed in here? You succeed in putting an end to the suffering you've been causing yourself unnecessarily. You succeed in realizing the Deathless. And you do it by developing more alertness, developing more mindfulness. You do it with this simple process of focusing on the breath, being sensitive to the breath, exploring the way the breath is moving in the present moment. All the good things in the mind build on this.