

## Rehab Work

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Take a couple of good long, deep in-and-out breaths and see how that feels. If it feels good, keep it up. If it feels too strenuous, try another rhythm of breathing: shorter, more shallow, heavier, or lighter. Just pose this question in the mind: “What kind of breathing would feel good now?” You’ll notice that the breathing process is not just air coming in and out of the nose. The body has to move. The movement of the body is what we’re interested in. That’s also a kind of breath. It’s the energy that allows the air to come in and out.

Notice where you feel that energy: where it feels good, where it doesn’t feel so good. If it doesn’t feel good, you can change it. Just keep asking that question, “What would feel good right now?” Each time you breathe in, each time you breathe out, try to get a sense of exactly how long a breath feels just right. You want to stay with the breathing process as consistently as you can so that you can notice the little signals that tell you things like, “Now the breath is getting too long,” or “It wasn’t deep enough just now, so let’s try a little bit deeper this time.” Only when you watch continually like this can you actually notice these things. If your attention skips off someplace else, you miss a lot of the signals.

You’re trying to stay with the breath, but don’t stay just through force of will. Try to stay with a sense of curiosity. You’re exploring and learning new habits. You may discover that the way you’ve been breathing has not been good for the body. Some parts of the body seem to be starved of breath energy; other parts are overworked. If you find a part of the body that’s been overworked, let it relax and think of each breath coming in directly to that part to give it more energy. You may have to adjust your posture a bit, so that the body is more balanced, not leaning to the left, not leaning to the right, not stooped over, not tilting back. Try to sensitize yourself to what the body is doing in the process of breathing and to what you can do to make it a more healing process. After all, the breath is what keeps the body alive. If the breathing goes really well, it’ll do more than just keep the body alive. It can actually be healing for the body.

The Buddha often compares his Dhamma to medicine. He’s a doctor. The medicine is not a chemical compound. It’s more like a rehab process. You’re rehabilitating your body. You’re rehabilitating your mind—because the mind has its diseases, too, you know: the diseases of greed, aversion, and delusion. We wound ourselves with things we do under the influence of these unskillful mental qualities. Although we may have picked up habits from the outside, in the same way that we can pick up germs from the outside, the act of choosing to follow the habits that others have modeled for us was *our* choice. Our resistance was down. So the diseases we have in the mind are self-inflicted. To heal the mind, you don’t just let it sit there and do nothing, or be nonreactive. Again, think of this as rehab work. If you sprain your ankle, you can’t just sit there and leave it immobile. That’ll make it worse. You’ve got to find exercises to keep it mobile and to keep it from freezing into unhealthy positions.

This is why, when the Buddha teaches meditation, he doesn’t say simply to be nonreactive. He does want you to learn patience, so you can sit with things for a while and watch them, but not just to leave it at that. You watch things carefully and patiently so that you can see when you have any unhealthy habits, any unhealthy ways of thinking, unhealthy ways of perceiving things. By noticing them, you can change them. That’s why he gives you suggestions for different ways of looking at things and different ways of exercising the mind.

He had a conversation one time with some monks, telling them it would be good if they practiced more breath meditation. One monk said, “I already practice breath meditation.” The Buddha asked, “What kind of breath meditation do you practice?” The monk replied, “I put aside thoughts of the past. I don’t hanker after the future. I’m just very equanimous about what happens in the present moment as I breathe in, as I breathe

out.” The Buddha responded, “Well, there is that kind of breath meditation, but that’s not the kind that gives the best results.” Then, he taught the monks the sixteen steps of breath meditation.

If you look at those sixteen steps, you notice a lot of them involve training you to breathe in a certain way: to pay attention to, emphasize, and give rise to certain feelings; to give rise to certain mental states, and to give rise to mental qualities that are healing. For instance, once you get in touch with how the breath feels, try to be aware of the whole body so that you can notice the impact of the breath on the body. If you notice that it’s too strenuous in some spots, or you’re putting too much force on some spots, try to calm it down. You try to breathe in a way that gives rise to a sense of fullness and ease. You begin to notice how the feelings created by focusing on the breath have an impact on the mind. You also notice how the perceptions of what’s happening in the breathing process have an impact both on the mind and on the way you breathe. You try to calm all of that down.

Then you look at the state of your mind. Is it steady enough? How is its energy level? If its energy level is low, try to gladden it. If it’s too frenetic, try to steady it. If you notice that the mind is thinking about or focusing on things in a way that’s burdensome, try to free it from those burdens. In other words, you’re doing rehab work. You’re exercising the mind through playing with the process of breathing. You’re getting to know the process of breathing really thoroughly, and through that you’re getting to see how the process of fabrication shapes your present experience.

In the Buddha’s analysis of causation, he talks about how ignorance has an impact on the process of fabrication, and the three types of fabrication—bodily, verbal, and mental—then have an impact on how we receive input through the senses. One of the ways we fabricate our experience is through the way we breathe. That’s called bodily fabrication. When we breathe with ignorance, it leads to suffering and to stress. But if we breathe with full awareness and alertness, it can alleviate that stress. So, what we’re doing now is bringing more knowledge and awareness to the process of breath-fabrication. By exercising all the possibilities of how you could think about and perceive the breath, you can discover what’s most healing for you. This way we’re also exercising the mind by exploring the process of breath-fabrication together with mental fabrication: how we fabricate feelings and perceptions, and how those feelings and perceptions shape the state of the mind. We’re taking a proactive stance. Sometimes this means just watching for a while and not doing anything so that you can see things more clearly. But once you see things clearly, then when you see you’re doing something uncomfortable or harmful, you can change your habits.

As you develop sensitivity from this exploration, it can then be applied to other habits and ways of thinking and acting that are harmful either to yourself or to others as well. You’re continuing to do rehab work on your own mind, learning how to think and act in new ways.

There was a group of ascetics during the Buddha’s time, called the Jains. They reasoned that people suffer because of their actions. Therefore, people should just stop acting. By learning how to stop acting, being totally nonreactive, that would be the way to release. The Buddha pointed out that it’s not healing for the mind to simply stop acting. It doesn’t release or free the mind. It just freezes things. His path is more proactive by teaching you to examine your actions in the present and, wherever they’re causing harm, to learn to act in a new way, a way that ultimately does lead to the end of action. This new way of acting also leads to the end of intention, but it does this through understanding and through the mastery of skills: how to breathe, how to perceive things, and how to think about things. These are the skills with which you heal yourself.

As you look back on your life, you’re bound to see lots of times when you acted in ways that were hurtful to yourself and to others. What you’re trying to create now as you meditate is a place where you can do healing work: Do healing actions, think healing thoughts, think healing perceptions. You start by training your thoughts or perceptions and learning how to breathe in a healing way. This is rehab work for the mind; it’s rehab work for the way you approach experience in general.

So the Buddha wasn’t the kind of doctor who would have you lie in bed and remain immobile. He also wasn’t the kind of doctor who would just give you a shot and send you home. He was more like a physical

therapist teaching you new ways to walk, new ways to hold your body as you sit. Further than that, of course, he teaches you new ways to breathe, new ways to think, new ways to perceive things. As you develop these new habits, you find that the habits themselves are healing.

So think of the breath work, the meditation, as rehab work. Effort is involved. You have to learn how to think in new ways, how to ask questions, and how to look with new eyes at what's going on. You have to notice how you're shaping your experience and then try out new, more healing ways of shaping that experience. As you develop these new skills, you find that they take you to true health. That's one of the Buddha's names for *nibbana*: true health for the mind, a mind that's been healed, because it knows how to do its own healing work.