

## *Preparing to Meditate*

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Try to get the mind ready to meditate. Sometimes you find that it settles down easily: just focus on the breath and there it is. Other times, there's a resistance. Something's wrong. Sometimes what's wrong may be the breath itself, but other times it's attitudes you carry around in the mind.

We like to think that meditation is a process of not thinking. But it's interesting to see how many of the meditation topics the Buddha recommends actually involve thinking: giving the mind the right perspective, the right attitude to apply itself properly to the present moment.

And not only your thinking: You also have to get your life in order, too, when you meditate. You can't just catch a person, sit them down, and say, "Okay, meditate," and have the mind settle down—because of the narratives of some people's lives. The easier ones just drop so you can get into the present moment. For other people, though, the narrative is a lot stickier. There are a lot more things pulling you out of the present, especially if there are areas of remorse over what you've done, or if you tend to be a person who's in a lot of denial. Sit down in the present moment and the things that you try to deny just start coming up.

So, when the Buddha teaches us to reflect on our virtues and reflect on our generosity as a way of bringing the mind to a state where it feels confident in itself so that it can settle down, you've got to have some generous actions, you've got to have some virtuous actions to reflect on. You can't just make them up out of whole cloth.

Which is why the narrative of your life is a very important part of the practice. What kind of life are you creating? Each time you make a decision, you're writing the story of your life. Can you look back on those decisions and say, "Well that's good story"—one that you can look at, reflect on, use to gain some confidence in yourself and then put it aside and work on the meditation? Or are there other issues that are going to make it hard to settle down?

These are questions that we each have to ask ourselves, and then live our lives accordingly. Each time you make a decision, ask yourself, "Is this a decision that's going to help with my meditation or is it going to harm it? What are the reverberations of this decision going to be in the mind?"

That's one step in preparing yourself to meditate: looking at your life and making changes in anything that's going to make it difficult to meditate.

Then you look at your views. This is why the Buddha's very basic level of right view is conviction in the principle of karma, because what we're doing as we meditate is a very active application of that principle. In other words, your

experience depends on your past actions and your present actions together.

If you meditate hoping that enlightenment is just going to land on top of you or just come floating in—if you've got that kind of wrong view about karma, that wrong view about meditation, it's going to make it really difficult for any real practice to come about.

But if you're very clear on the fact that what you're doing here is a type of present karma, and that everything in the meditation will depend on what you're doing in the present, then you get a lot more careful about what you do, pay a lot more attention to what you do.

You start looking for causes and effects. In the very beginning, the main effect you want to get is what's going to help the mind to settle down. So be very clear on what you're doing. You have to be mindful, you have to keep the breath in mind, and you have to be alert.

One, alert to the breath itself. What's going on in the breath? Is it coming in? Is it going out? Is it comfortable? Is it not? And then, two, alert to what the mind is doing. Is the mind staying with the breath? Or is it getting ready to slip off?

When you really get alert to what's going on in the mind, you find that there's a stage where it's with the breath but getting ready to leave. Watch out for that stage. Don't wait till it's already left and you're off thinking about something else.

You might think of it as like an inchworm coming to the edge of a leaf. The hind legs are still on this leaf but the front legs are waving out in the air looking for something else to latch on to. As soon as another leaf or something comes along, okay, pop! There it goes.

So, watch out for the mind when it's in that state, looking for something else to do, beginning to get a little bit bored with the breath, not paying so much attention anymore. If the breath gets boring, it's because you're not paying careful attention. At the very least you're missing some of the subtleties of the breath.

And at a deeper level you begin to see that the breath is a mirror for the mind, so whatever's going to happen in the mind will get mirrored there in the breath if you look carefully enough.

As for mindfulness, it's simply a question of memory, reminding yourself all the time: Stay with the breath; stay with the breath. From the very beginning, you have to be very insistent on this. Just keep hammering it in: Stay with the breath. After a while, when the mind begins to settle in, you don't have to remind yourself so much, but it's still there in the background. You just can't let yourself forget.

These two qualities, mindfulness and alertness: When they really get developed, they start turning into the factors of jhana. Mindfulness becomes

directed thought. Alertness becomes evaluation as you begin to evaluate cause and effect there in the breath.

When there are comfortable breath sensations, you spread them out so that you're alert to the whole body, mindful of the whole body. That's when simple mindfulness practice turns into concentration practice as you develop this awareness of the whole body breathing in, the whole body breathing out, and then the breath growing calmer.

So focus on what you're doing with the meditation, and the results will have to come. All too often we sit here and say, "When are the results going to come?" Well, if you don't get the causes straight, the results will never have a chance to come.

Be very clear on that: that we're working here with cause and effect in the present moment. You don't lose sight of the causes and when the results do start coming, you don't just jump on the results and forget the causes. That doesn't work at all. It'd be like jumping off a ladder onto a cloud: You just go right through. You've got to stay on the ladder.

As for whatever pleasure comes with the results, it'll be there. You don't have to go slurping it up. Just keep working away, working away at the causes, and the results will come and do their work for you.

It's like someone who keeps working and the wages keep coming in, coming in, coming in. If you decide you want to give up your job because you've got enough money to splurge, okay, you can splurge for a while, but then it's all gone. Try to find a way in which you're still doing the work but also enjoying the results.

And don't be worried about getting attached to concentration. That kind of attachment is a healthy one. After all, you're going to need something to hold on to as you begin to let go of other things. The nature of the mind is that it can't just let go of everything all at once.

The image Ajaan Maha Boowa uses is of climbing a ladder. If you want to let go of the lower rungs, you've got to give yourself a higher rung to hold onto. Then, as you go up the ladder, each time you let go of a lower rung you've got to have a higher rung to hold onto to get you up. Only when you've got to where you want to go—say that it's a ladder going up to the roof—when you're on the roof, then you can let go.

But in the meantime, just keep holding on. When you're holding on to a good state of concentration, then it's a lot easier to let go of things like lust and anger and fear and greed and all the other things that we tend to hold on to if we don't have anything better. So latch onto the breath.

As Ajaan Fuang used to say, it's like putting a kite up in the air: Finally it catches the wind and goes sailing up. So you want to catch the wind. It's an image that works better in Thai because the word for wind and breath is the

same word: *lom*. So you catch the breath finally like a kite that catches the wind. And there you are.

Then the amount of effort you have to put in gets less. But you still need just a little bit of effort to keep you there, to keep you balanced.

It's like a person learning how to control a sailboat. In the beginning, you've got your hand on the rudder and you sense that it's tipping too far in one direction, so you turn the rudder too far in the other direction and the boat tips over. Then you try it again, "Ah, too far in the other direction!" You tip over again. But after a while you begin to get a sense of how much is just right. You keep your hand on the rudder and it seems like the slightest touch on the rudder is enough to keep the boat under control.

That's what the effort of the meditation turns into. It's not strenuous all the time. In the beginning, there's a lot of pushing and pulling and conflict in the mind. But when things begin to settle down, the amount of effort gets less and less and less. Too much effort will actually tip it over. Not enough effort and you lose it. So try to find just the right balance.

This is something that can be learned only through trial and error. And a lot of this is something that each person has to discover for him or herself alone. You're taking apart your own particular resistance to concentration, and each person has his or her own complex of things that resist getting the mind to settle down. You have to work through your issues yourself. Some of them are verbal; some of them are preverbal. This is why meditation is an individual thing.

There's a passage where the Buddha talks about two kinds of truths. He said there are noble truths and then there are private truths. Private truths are the things that are particular to each meditator. When things finally get into the groove, though, then the noble truths take over and the issues that arise in the meditation become universal. Stress or pain, its cause, the path of practice leading to its cessation and its actual cessation: Those are noble truths.

The word *noble* can also mean *universal*. Everyone's meditation eventually will have to fall into this universal pattern, in the groove of the noble truths, if they're going to gain awakening.

But in the meantime, to get into that groove, each of us has our individual truths: little realizations, little understandings that suddenly come up to cure our own particular misunderstandings. Those kind of truths can be discovered only through your own exploration, your own experimentation with this principle of cause and effect in the present moment. See what gets results.

Of course, as your evaluation gets more experienced, then you become a better and better judge of which results in the meditation are actually good.

But this is a process we all have to go through.

As the Buddha said, everyone who's purified the mind in the past, in the

present, and in the future has to go through this process of trial and error. This is how you learn; this is where real insight comes from.

You may hear about insight from other people, read about it in the books, think about it on your own. But the actual discovery comes through this process of trial and error: trying to develop mindfulness, trying to develop alertness, bringing them to the level of directed thought and evaluation so that everything finally settles down into singleness of preoccupation. The mind has one object, the mind fills the body, the body fills the mind. There's a very strong sense of singleness.

That's when you're beginning to get into the groove of the noble truths.

But to do this, you've got to—at least as a working hypothesis—look at the whole issue of cause and effect in the present moment. Be very clear on what the causes are, be clear on what you're doing. Because that's the only way you'll see.