

Introduction: Meditation as a Skill

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The purpose of the meditation is to develop the skillful qualities in the mind. It takes the same principles that we would apply to any skill—being mindful, being alert, evaluating the results of your actions and being ingenious about figuring out new ways to solve mistakes: It takes those mental qualities and applies them directly to the mind. Think about any skill that you've mastered. When you learned to weave, what did the very first cloth that you wove look like? It looked pretty messy. You had the basic principles down, you knew there's a warp, there's a weft, but the cloth didn't come out well. Then how did you move from that cloth to a cloth that really looked nice?

Whatever the skill, first you've got to give it a try. Keep in mind the instructions, what the teacher tells you. What the teacher tells you is based on what worked for the teacher, but the teacher can't tell you how to make it really beautiful or how to be skillful at it. They give the basic principles, and then you start teaching yourself, noticing when the weave comes out well, when it doesn't come out well. Then figure out: What did you do? What was the difference? This means that you have to be observant, and then more mindful and more alert the next time you do it, to see if you can do it better and better and better each time.

The same principle applies here. You focus on your breath, make up your mind you're going to stay with the breath. When it comes in, you know it's coming in; when it goes out, you know it's going out. Try to be as consistent as possible in staying with the breath. This means you have to develop mindfulness, to remember to stay with the breath each time it comes in, each time it goes out.

As for alertness, notice what's actually going on with the breath. Notice when the mind is actually staying with the breath and when it's moving off. If you catch it moving off, bring it back. Each time it moves off, each time you find it wandering, as soon as you catch it, bring it back. This is ardency. This is a way of strengthening your mindfulness and strengthening your original intention that you really do mean business, you really want to learn how to do this skillfully.

It's like a physical exercise. As you do this repeatedly, it strengthens your mindfulness, it strengthens your alertness.

Then try to notice what kind of breathing is easy to stay with. Usually the more comfortable the breath, the easier it is to stay with. So think of breathing in a way that feels really refreshing. Don't make this a grim task, because an important element in any skill is that you learn to enjoy doing it. So just pose the

question: What kind of breathing would feel good now? Notice in which parts of the body you sense the in-breath or the out-breath, and how those feelings feel. Are they pleasant or not? If they're not pleasant, ask yourself: What would be a different way of breathing that *would* be pleasant? This is where you start using your ingenuity. And be very frank with yourself about the results.

They've done studies about people who've made important advances in the medical profession—what works, what doesn't work in dealing with a particular disease—and they've found that certain qualities apply across the board.

The first is moral integrity. In other words, you don't fudge the results of your experiments. If you make a mistake, you admit you make a mistake.

That's the second part: recognize your mistakes. That of course, requires a third quality, which is that you monitor what you've done, and the results of what you've done.

And the final quality is ingenuity. If something isn't working out, try to think of new ways that *would* work.

So you've got moral integrity, the willingness to gauge the results of your actions, the willingness to admit mistakes, and the willingness to try something new, the ability to think up something new, a new approach, when you've tested all the alternatives, and none of them work.

These are precisely the qualities you want to bring to the meditation. The quality of honesty and integrity is especially important. If you're not honest with yourself, you can't really judge what you're doing or the results of what you're doing. And that way, you don't learn. So honesty lies at the basis of any learning experience.

So approach this as a skill, a skill with many ramifications.

Once you've strengthened your mindfulness, strengthened your alertness, and your powers of discernment this way, you'll find that you can use them in many different situations, whatever the task. Once I was talking with a potter in Thailand, watching him throw a pot. He was telling me the most important thing was to keep his mind upright as he threw the pot. All the other skills, he said, grew out of that. And the same thing applies here. If you see thoughts moving out, you don't have to move out with them. Keep your mind upright, not leaning left or right. Just stay right there.

So it's important that you realize, when thoughts go out, that it's not your mind going out. Your attention follows a thought, and thoughts seem to direct your attention someplace else. They're like pointers, little arrows here in the present moment that point in different directions. But the thoughts themselves occur in the present moment. If they're thoughts about the past, thoughts about

the future, think of them as little arrows here in the present, and you stay right here. See them as arrows, rather than trying to get into them and going off in the direction where they point. That way, the thought will go for a little ways and then just drop. It won't amount to anything. If you get involved in the thoughts, though, you can spin out all kinds of narratives, but then you've lost the breath. You've abandoned your original intention. So you come back.

The next time a similar sort of process happens, remind yourself: This is what mindfulness is for. You don't have to follow the thoughts. Just stay here with the sensation of the breath, because your basic awareness doesn't leave the present moment, it's always here. It's not that you actually go back into the past or into the future. You're always right here. It's just that the thoughts *refer* you to the past, *refer* you to the future. But they happen right here.

So no matter where they're spinning, all you have to do is just step out of them. Don't follow them. Stay with the breath. If they're going to chatter in the back of your mind, let them chatter, but you don't have to get involved in the conversation. Try to immerse your awareness as much as possible in the sensation of the body, sitting here breathing in, breathing out, right now.

So much in the mind's ability to find happiness depends on just this: your ability to be mindful, to be really observant about what's going on in the mind. The mind has this ability to shape so much of your experience, and if it's not trained, it's like a person who weaves a cloth once and it comes out pretty bad, then gives up on weaving cloth. He then tries to make a pot, throws a pot or two, they don't come out well, so he just gives up on being a potter.

If you're like that, you remain an amateur all your life. You remain clumsy all your life in how you're shaping your experience. And it's no wonder that we suffer. We don't give any attention to the artistry or the skills we need to bring to the way we react to sights, sounds, smells, tastes, tactile sensations, and ideas. Some of our experience comes from outside, from the past, but a lot of it depends on how we shape it. That's what really determines whether we're going to experience happiness or sorrow, pleasure or pain.

So as we are meditating, we're learning to develop the skills that teach us how to shape our experience from moment to moment. This is why meditation is such a basic skill, regardless of your background, your beliefs. We all know that we do shape our experience at least to some extent, and the way we shape our experience doesn't affect only us, it affects the people around us as well. So it behooves us to try to do this as skillfully as possible, to develop these qualities of mindfulness, alertness, persistence, discernment, and concentration.

So we've got an hour to work directly on these skills. Try to make the most of it.