

## *Why We Meditate*

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When you meditate, it's important you understand both how to do it and why you're doing it. The how isn't all that difficult to explain. It may not be easy to do, but the instructions are pretty simple: Focus on your breath. Notice, when you breathe in, where you feel the breath in the body. And we're not talking just about the air coming in and out, but also about the movement of the body that brings the air in and then allows it out. Where is that feeling most pronounced, where is it strongest? Focus your attention there. Try to stay with the sensation of the breath all the way in, all the way out.

You may want to use a meditation word along with the breath. *Buddho* is a traditional one. It means awake. It's the title the Buddha earned on the night of his awakening. It's a quality of mind that you want to develop. So you divide the word into two: *bud-* for the in-breath, *dho* for the out-. Allow the breath to be comfortable. It's normal when you first focus on the breath to find yourself forcing it too much, because you want to make sure it's clear, you want to make sure it's distinct, so you make it too strong or too long, too short, whatever. So remind yourself that it's going to be easier to stay with the breath if it's comfortable.

You can experiment. See what rhythm of breathing feels best right now. Think "long breath" and see what the body does and how it feels. Stick with it for a while and then think "shorter breath." If shorter breath feels better, then stick with the shorter breath. If not, go back to the longer breath. Then after a while, think "deeper," see how that feels. "More shallow," see how that feels.

In other words, take some time to experiment with the sensation of breathing to see how it feels until you get a rhythm that feels just right. Then stick with that rhythm as long as it feels good. If you find that after a while it starts getting mechanical or unpleasant, then experiment some more. See what other changes need to be made.

In other words, stay on top of the breath, stay on top of the needs of the body, because the body's needs will change as you sit here. If you find the mind calming down, you'll find that you need to breathe less and less. The body will get enough oxygen. In fact, it's possible, when the mind is really still, that the sensation of in-and-out breathing will stop, because you're getting enough oxygen coming through the pores of your skin.

So that's basically how you do the meditation. When the sensation of breathing feels good, you can think of allowing that sensation to flow to different

parts of your body, like a current of honey going down in front of the body, down the back of the body, down the shoulders and the arms, down to the base of the spine, out your legs to the tips of the toes. Don't force the sensations in the different parts of the body, but if there's a sensation of ease and comfort, allow it to flow, allow it to connect with different parts of the body, working through any sense of tension or tightness you may have in the body, and allowing it to dissolve away.

The more ease and comfort you feel in the body, the more a sense of fullness comes up, then the easier it is to stay with the breath. So that's pretty much the how: how you do it.

The why is also important, because it helps keep you with it, and to understand what you're doing, to understand the point of all this, because you're going to find different voices in the mind saying, "Why am I doing this? Why don't I think about that, why don't I think about this?" Not everybody in this committee of your mind is sold on breath meditation yet. So even though the sense of ease that can come from breathing may help, you need more than just that. You need to be able to remind yourself: Why are you doing this?

That's why we have those chants before we start it. On one hand, there's that very last chant that says, "May I be happy." That's what we want. Everything we do in life is for the sake of happiness, long-term or short-term, wise or unwise, but there's a quest for happiness in everything we do, and the Buddha has us recognize that and honor it. He doesn't say you should be embarrassed about your search for your own happiness. He says this is an important thing. This is why we act anyhow, so let's do it wisely. Let's look for a happiness that's long-term.

The other chant is there to remind us of some of the obstacles we're going to face in trying to find a long-term happiness. One, we live in the world full of aging, illness, death, and separation. Of those five reflections we had just now, the first four are pretty depressing, but they remind us that this is what the human world is like.

You've probably heard the story of the woman with the dead child who refused to believe that her child was dead. She was looking for a doctor who would cure its illness. Someone finally recommends she go see the Buddha, and the Buddha says, "Okay, there is this medicine for your child, mustard seed," which back in those days was the cheapest thing you could find in any house in India, "but it has to come from a house in which nobody in the family has ever died." So she goes from house to house asking for mustard seed, and people are happy to give it to her. But she says, "Oh, by the way, has there been a death in the family?" Everyone says, "Oh, of course, father, mother, sister, brother, child, son,

daughter.” So she goes from house to house to house, and finally is willing to admit, yes, her child is dead. This is a part of human life. It’s everywhere.

In fact, it was this reflection on aging, illness, and death that sent the young prince who eventually became the Buddha out into the forest. He had power, wealth, everything you could imagine, yet he realized that one day this power and wealth he had, all the happiness he had, was going to be ended by aging, illness, and death. He had no defense against those things. He wondered if there was a way to find a different happiness, one that would last. On seeing a forest wanderer, he decided, “This must be it. Go out into the forest and really look deep down inside into your mind, to see if there’s an alternative, a kind of happiness that can come from within.”

And as with most people who’ve lived a life of sensual indulgence, he went to the opposite extreme—extreme austerity—thinking that if he could subject himself to as much pain as possible and keep his mind resilient in the face of the pain, that might be his breakthrough to something important. But after six years, he realized that didn’t work. Which was how he then came back to the middle path, avoiding the extremes of sensual indulgence and self-torture: in other words, using this state of mind—calm, clear, easeful, that we’re trying to work on right here right now—as a way of observing the mind to see what it does to create suffering. He realized that the cause of suffering isn’t outside. It’s what the mind does to itself, how it handles the events of life.

This is that fifth reflection: It’s our actions that make all the difference between whether we’re going to suffer or not. That’s the reflection that’s hopeful, because we can change our actions. If we’ve been acting in an unskillful or thoughtless way, we can change. The change has to come from learning how to control your mind so that you can observe it. This is why we meditate, trying to exert some sort of control over the mind, keeping it mindful. In other words, you try to keep the breath in mind and you keep alert, watching to see what the mind is doing.

It’s only then that you can clearly see what the mind does that causes suffering and what does it that actually leads to an end of suffering—so that even though you live in a world filled with aging, illness, death, and separation, the mind doesn’t have to suffer.

Then there’s that other reflection—it wasn’t translated, or at least we didn’t chant the translation: the reflection on the requisites. This is another issue in finding happiness: reflecting on the fact that when you’re born into this world, you need food, clothing, shelter, and medicine. In other words, you’re born with needs. We don’t come into this world complete. Each of us is like a big gaping

hole. As the ajaans say, you can stuff whole herds of cattle, a farmful of vegetables into your stomach, yet it never seems to be full. That's just the food side. Then there's clothing, shelter, medicine, and our pursuit of these things. As we were children, of course, we depended on our parents, but as we grow up we have to become more self-reliant here. We tend to go way overboard as we try to find these things, causing a lot of harm to ourselves and to other people.

This is the other big issue in the pursuit of happiness. If your happiness depends on causing harm to other people, they're not going to stand for it. That kind of happiness can't last. So again, you have to look into the mind. Is there a happiness that doesn't harm anyone? Doesn't harm yourself, doesn't harm others? That's the only kind of happiness you can hope to depend on.

So all these reflections come together. We want happiness. We have to honor that desire. Buddhism is one of the few teachings that actually says to honor your desire for happiness. The world at large says, "True happiness? Don't even think about it. Just buy our stuff. We can't promise real fulfillment, but we can promise at least a little bit of pleasure in ownership, a little bit of pleasure in consumption. That's the best there is." That's what they want us to think so that we focus all our energies and try to get this, get that, to keep the economy going.

But the Buddha says, No, you have the potential for true happiness. Each of us does. You should honor that desire for true happiness, a happiness that doesn't disappoint, a happiness that doesn't cause any harm—in other words, a happiness that's not dependent on things that age, grow ill, die, and get separated. A happiness that doesn't demand that you keep looking for things and stuffing things into the body or into your home at the expense of other people.

What does that leave us? It leaves us with the mind. As the Buddha pointed out, what he discovered as he pursued that path to awakening is that there are qualities that each of us has in our mind that we can train until we can depend on them.

Like mindfulness, which is pretty simple thing: It's just a matter of being able to keep something in mind, but in most of us, it's not developed. You try to keep something in mind a little bit and then you're off to something else.

Or alertness, really watching what you're doing, being clear about your intentions, being clear about your actions, being clear about their results: That's a quality we all have to some extent, but again, it's not thorough, it's not all around, it needs to be developed. It needs to be trained, like all the good qualities of the mind: goodwill, compassion, concentration, discernment. We all have these qualities to some extent, it's simply a question of learning how to develop them. If

you really develop them, you find that you've got all the potentials you need for true happiness right here in the mind.

Once you can tap into that inner source of happiness, then you can live in the world coming from a position of strength, helping other people when they need to be helped, and you're able to provide the help. It enables you to live in all kinds of difficult situations, and yet the mind can still be very happy. This is a principle you see all around you. There are some people who are extremely wealthy, powerful, connected, and yet they're miserable. There are other people who don't have very much at all, but they seem to be really happy. It shows that it's not the outside circumstances that can determine whether you're happy or not. It's how the mind talks to itself, how it focuses on things, how it observes things, what it learns, the skills it has in dealing with itself and with events around it. That's where the secret to happiness lies.

This is why we meditate, and it's good to keep this in mind at all times, because there will be a tendency for the mind to say, "Well, nothing seems to be happening with the breath, it's just in and out, there's no third alternative, what else is there?" It starts looking around. When that question comes up, you say, "Wait a minute, we haven't really looked at the breath thoroughly yet. After all, the Buddha gained awakening while looking at his breath. So there must be more to it than just the in and out." Of course, his breath is no different from yours, it's simply the qualities of mind that he learned how to train and develop and bring to the breath in the present moment: That's what made all the difference.

So if the mind starts wandering off in its old ways, remind yourself, "I've been there before." It's like the movies on the American Movie Channel. My brother's been sick for the past couple years, so he's seen their whole repertoire. And it's the same with our mind. So many of the thoughts that come through our mind have come before, we've seen them before. If they were movies, you wouldn't bother to pay for them. Yet the mind keeps going back, going back, going back to them.

Here you're providing an alternative. Here is something new. As the Buddha said, when you practice this way, you'll ultimately attain something you've never attained before, you'll know something you've never known before, you'll realize things that you never had a chance to realize before. There are these new things in life. So be willing to follow the breath to see where it takes you.

This is the kind of understanding you need to meditate: one, understanding how to do it; and two, understanding why. That helps keep you with it, and it's the staying with it that makes all the difference. It's like a cream you put on your skin to heal rashes. It's not the case that you put the cream on and then wipe it off right away. You put it on and you let it stay there for long periods of time, so that

it can do its healing work. It's the same with the breath. It takes a while sometimes for the breath to help heal the mind, but it is healing, and when the breath is comfortable coming in, going out, you can get touch with how to let that comfortable sensation spread throughout the body, down the nerves, throughout the body, out to the skin. Then just let it stay there. You'll find gradually, bit by bit by bit, that the mind does feel healed, the body feels healed. And even though this isn't the ultimate happiness that the Buddha promises, that still it's an important step in that direction.

In other words, the path that he teaches doesn't save all of its happiness for the end. Right concentration is an important element of the path. In fact, that was the first factor he discovered. It can give you a sense of peace and well-being as you go through life continuing to practice. This is your strength; this is your nourishment.

So you've got the rest of the hour to work on the *how*. And if you find the mind wandering off, keep reminding it *why* you're here. With time, you're sure to see results.