

# How & Why We Meditate

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We start with thoughts of goodwill to remind ourselves of why we want to meditate. We want to find a happiness that's reliable, that doesn't harm us or anybody else. That's why we spread goodwill both to ourselves and to all beings, to remind ourselves that we're looking for a special kind of happiness.

Then, when we're clear about why we're doing it, we settle down to business. Here, the business is watching your breath. Take a couple of good, long deep in-and-out breaths and notice where you feel the breathing in the body. You feel the passage of air through the nose but you also feel the rise and fall of the chest, sometimes the rise and fall of the abdomen or the shoulders. Notice where the feeling of breathing is most pronounced. Allow your attention to settle there and keep it there all the way through the in-breath, all the way through the out, and even in the moments between the breaths.

As you breathe in, notice if there's any unnecessary tension in that part of the body. It may be that the breath is too long, so that as you get toward the end of the breath it's beginning to feel uncomfortable. Well, allow the breath to grow shorter. Or if it's too short and you feel like you're not really getting the full energy of the breath, allow it to stretch out a bit. In other words, experiment with the breathing to see what feels best.

If you find something that feels good, stick with it. It may feel good for a long time, or it may feel good for just a little while and then not so good anymore. In that case, try changing it again. Try to keep on top of what the body needs.

The purpose here is twofold: one, to get the mind to settle down in the present moment, and two, to be observant. The breath is one of the few bodily functions that you can actually change consciously, so try to take advantage of that fact, both for the settling down and for the being observant. If the breath feels good and you find it interesting to notice how the way you breathe has an impact on how the body feels, that helps you to stay in the present moment. You start learning about what the breath is doing—and as you learn about the breath, you're going to be able to learn about the mind as well.

Because ultimately the breath is not the problem. The real problem lies in the mind. We all want happiness and yet we choose to do things that can lead to pain, for ourselves or for other people. So there's a disconnect. The question is, where exactly is the disconnect, and why? Sometimes it's because we don't have a very clear knowledge of what our intentions are. Or it may be because we don't really see the connection between our actions and their results.

So, starting with the breath, notice what your intention is. You're here for the sake of happiness. You're here to learn how to train the mind so that it doesn't create a lot of problems. And of course, not every part of your mind is going to be cooperative. Some parts are going to wander away with other agendas. So for the time being you just let them go. In other words, you don't have to get entangled with them. Just notice that there are other thoughts in the mind, not connected with the breath, but you don't have to follow them. That right there is an important insight. You don't have to run after everything that comes up in the mind.

Then stick with the breath as long as you can and see what impact it has on the mind and on the body. This is the part of the practice that requires some conviction. It's like making scrambled eggs. The right way to make scrambled eggs is to keep the heat really low. You stand there, stirring the eggs in the pan, and nothing seems to be happening. You feel a very strong temptation to turn up the heat to speed things up, but you have to resist that temptation. Just keep on stirring and stirring and stirring, and after a while the eggs really do begin to coagulate on the bottom of the pan. It's in the period when you don't see any immediate results coming that you need to have the conviction that the cookbook was right.

It's the same with the meditation. There are times when you sit in meditation and nothing much seems to be happening. And so you need the conviction to stick with it to give it time to do its work.

This is why we have the chants on the Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Sangha prior to the meditation: to remind ourselves that this path we're following here is not a brand new path. It's not something we just recently cooked up. In fact, the Buddha himself said he didn't invent the path. He discovered an old path. There had been Buddhas before him, awakened people before him, and this is the same path they all discovered.

We have all of the Buddha's awakened disciples' guarantee that, Yes, this path does work. So you just stick with it. Part of the mind will complain because, of course, the mind still has its greed, aversion, and delusion. It's not the case that you sit down, close your eyes, and they all go away. They hide out for a while, but they're going to come up again. And they're going to complain: They'd rather do this, think that, go here, go there. Just remind yourself that you've been following greed, aversion, and delusion for who knows how long. They do provide some pleasure, but there's usually a lot of pain that goes along with that pleasure, and they leave you holding the bag. And you've been falling for their tricks again and again and again. How about trying something new? New for you at least. Something different.

So you just stick with the breath, stick with it, stick with it. As the Buddha said, patient endurance is what burns away a lot of the issues in the mind. It doesn't solve all the problems. The ultimate problems are going to require very refined discernment. You develop that discernment from your right effort as you practice. So, to develop right effort as a beginning step, you use whatever cruder skills you have at your disposal: conviction, patience, your stick-to-it-iveness.

Now, that can get very old very quickly if you don't have something of interest. That's why we emphasize working with the breath. When the breath gets comfortable, the next step is to think of that sense of comfortable breath spreading through different parts of the body. When we talk of "breath" here, it's not air coming in and out. It's the movement of energy in the body, which is what gets the air to come in and out to begin with. Without that energy, nothing would come in and out at all.

So notice, when you breathe in: Where do you feel the energy flow in the body? If you're really sensitive, you find that it goes throughout every nerve in your body, from the top of the head, down to the feet, down the shoulders, down the arms, all through the torso, deep into the head, all around. There's even an energy that surrounds the body.

So try to make yourself as sensitive as possible to the energy that's happening right here. If you can't feel it everywhere, focus on the areas where you can feel it, where it's most blatant. Eventually, as your sensitivity develops, you'll notice it in areas where you never sensed it before. You'll start to realize that many of the sensations you are familiar with are actually breath sensations.

As with any delicate task, this takes time. But if you have something with which to entertain yourself, you find it easier to stick with the task. Here the entertainment is actually part of the work. We've talked about working with the breath. We can also talk about playing with it. It can actually be fun. Start noticing that there are spots, say in your spine, where there's a lot of tension, but if you consciously relax the tension, a sense of flow will go through. It feels a lot more refreshing. You may find that releasing one spot of tension in the body has a chain reaction effect, so that other areas of tension in the body begin to relax as well. This is something that's fun to explore.

You may notice that the way you hold your body will change. When the flow of the breath energy in the body is improved, this is going to be good for your posture, good for your health. This is medicine that doesn't cost you anything at all.

And as for the work, try to spread your awareness to fill the whole body, so that eventually you'll be aware of the whole body all the time through the in-breath, all the time through the out. That broadens the range of your awareness, and you begin to see things happening in the mind that you didn't see before. They were hidden in a blind spot because

the range of your awareness was very narrow. But as you allow the awareness to broaden out, you begin to see little bits and snatches of thoughts here and there. You can catch sight of the mind's decisions. Usually, in an ordinary mind, there are several conversations going on at once. You may be paying attention to one or two, but there are others going on as well. Every now and then you slip in, add a little something, and then slip right out. Then you can deny what you just did, telling yourself that you didn't do any of that slipping around at all.

This is one of the reasons why we don't see the connection between our actions and the suffering we cause. There's a fair amount of denial going on in the mind. But when your range of awareness is all-around like this, it's harder to maintain that denial. And it's better for you that you don't. You can begin to see what's going on, and you're in a position to do something about it.

Some unskillful thoughts in the mind can hang on simply because you're not paying attention to them. When you see them clearly, it's very easy to let them go. There are others, though, that are going to require more work: what the Buddha calls "exerting a fabrication," or "fabricating an exertion." He uses both phrases. What they both mean is that you have to do some conscious work in order to understand why you're stuck on this particular kind of action or kind of thinking. Then you make the effort to provide the mind with an alternative, a more skillful alternative to the way you've been thinking. And it turns out that the way you breathe is very intimately connected with all of this. It's called bodily fabrication. As I said, it's one of the few functions in the body that you can intentionally change. So you work with that and put it to use.

Suppose that anger comes up in the mind. One of the first things you can do about it is to notice where in the body is the tension that goes along with the anger. Then try to breathe through it. Think of the breath energy as just dissolving that tension away, allowing it to dissipate out into the air, so you don't have to keep carrying it around—or you don't feel burdened with the need to get it out in your words or your deeds.

As you're working with the breath, you also become sensitive to two other kinds of fabrication the Buddha talked about. One is called verbal fabrication, which is the way the mind talks to itself. It directs its thoughts to a particular topic and then it starts evaluating the topic and deciding what it likes and what it doesn't like, what it wants to do and doesn't want to do with regard to that topic.

When you're working with the breath, you're engaging in just that kind of verbal fabrication. You become more conscious of it. You realize that you can change the way you talk to yourself about things—especially when you start getting new perspectives about what's going on in the present moment, as to what's going on in the mind and what's going on in the body.

Then there's what the Buddha calls mental fabrication, which are the perceptions, the labels we apply to things, along with feelings: feeling-tones of pleasure, pain, and neither pleasure nor pain.

And again, as you're working with the breath, you get hands-on experience in how you can shape these things and use them to shape the state of your mind. When you stick with the breath, you're also holding a particular perception of the breath in mind. If you think of the breath simply as the air coming in and out of the nose, that influences how you're going to breathe and the way you experience the breath. But if you think about the energy in the body as being breath, then it can go anywhere in the nervous system. It can go through anything at all. That gives you another perception. It's going to change the way you actually experience the breath. You can start to think of all those little tiny nerve endings going all the way out to the pores of your skin. They've got breath energy, too. If you hold that perception in mind, how does that change the way you breathe? How does it change the way you feel in the present moment? Does it feel more pleasant? If not, what other perception of breathing can you think of that would?

So as you focus on working and playing with the breath, you're getting some conscious experience in learning how to manipulate what the Buddha calls bodily fabrication, verbal fabrication, and mental fabrication, to create a sense of ease within the body and mind.

Then you can use those same fabrications to deal with whatever else comes up in the mind. For the time being, you don't want to get too involved in analyzing any distracting thoughts. Work on using these three types of fabrication to make your concentration as solid as you can. After a while, though, as you get skilled at these types of fabrication and you feel solid in the present moment, you can turn and look at whatever in the thought seemed so attractive. You can start analyzing the thought in terms of the three types of fabrication: How are you breathing in relation to the thought? What things are you saying to yourself that give rise, say, to greed or aversion or delusion? What are the perceptions or mental labels lying behind these thoughts? And what kind of feelings surround them? Can you change those things? Fabricate something different—so that when an incident comes up in your life that you would normally react to with anger, can you refabricate your reaction? Something that would give rise to lust: Can you refabricate that, so that the aversion, the anger, the lust don't hold any appeal?

Two things help to cut through that appeal. First, simply having access to a greater sense of well-being as you work with the breath and play with the breath, gives the mind's sense of hunger—just wanting some action, wanting some entertainment—less of an edge. Second, you see that the way you normally react is optional; it's causing stress that doesn't need to be there. You see that you're creating an awful lot of the situation just by the way you're looking at it, and if it's causing stress, well, why not look at it in a different way? Why not breathe around it in a different way? Perceive it in a different way. Evaluate it in a different way.

These are some of the lessons you can learn by working and playing with the breath like this: allowing the mind to become more firmly settled in the present and to see things a lot more clearly. You come to understand this process of how you fabricate your experience, and you can use that understanding to eliminate all the stress that the fabrication creates for the mind. This is one of the Buddha's major insights.

There's an analysis of suffering and stress called dependent co-arising, which describes all the different factors that, based on ignorance, give rise to stress and suffering. Half of them, including the three types of fabrication, come prior to sensory contact. Even before you see something or hear something, the mind is already primed to create suffering out of it—if it's operating under the power of ignorance. What we're doing here is learning how to bring knowledge to those processes so that we're no longer priming ourselves for suffering and stress. We're priming ourselves to put an end to it.

Which is in line with our original intention: We want to be able to see why the actions we do for the sake of happiness end up leading to stress and how we can change those ways, so that we can actually act in a way that leads to true happiness. We break things down into very simple components so that we can manage them. We realize that this is a problem we can manage. That's the good news of the Buddha's teachings: that even though we may be causing ourselves stress and suffering, we can put an end to it. If our suffering really were caused by things outside that were beyond our power, then there'd be no hope.

Or if it were caused by things we were doing that we couldn't change, there'd be no hope, either. But here we're making choices. We're probably not making them all that wisely, but we do have some wisdom. We do have some discernment. It's just a matter of applying it, giving it a foundation here in the present moment, and then really using it to look carefully to see: Where are we creating unnecessary stress and suffering for ourselves? What can we do to change? It's by using our wisdom and discernment with these basic, immediate things, exercising them with these questions, that they develop and grow.

When the mind is well-settled and well-centered like this, it fosters a sense of well-being. That sense of well-being is important. If, when you're feeling down on yourself and you're already feeling uncomfortable inside, you'll do nothing but criticize yourself, and that can be a dead end. But when the mind feels at ease, with a sense of fullness and well-being here in the present moment, then you can bring up the fact that you've got some habits here that are not all that skillful, and you're in the mood to tell yourself, "Let's do something about them." The mind is then a lot more willing to listen and to work on the problem.

So these are our basic skills. These are our basic components into which we break things down so that we can understand how we can put them back together in a better way. Then the things that we tend to cling to, the habits we tend to fall into over and over again that are leading to suffering and stress: We can take them apart. We can then put everything back together again in a better way that turns into a path that, unlike our normal life, doesn't just keep going around and around and around and around in feedback loops. This is a path that actually goes someplace: someplace that's really worth going to. And here again, this is where conviction is important.

The state the Buddha described as health, nibbana, is something he can't pull out of his heart to show to us. So we're not in a position where we can wait to accept things only when we know them for sure. We have to bring some conviction to what he says. On the one hand, we have to take his word for it when he talks about the kind of commitment it requires. On the other hand, he doesn't have the role of being a god who can tell us what we have to do. But he does say he's an expert in putting an end to suffering. That requires some conviction on our part. But it's not a conviction devoid of reason: What he says is very reasonable. But to follow him requires a lot of commitment. It's a path that requires an awful lot of attention and a lot of persistence, patience. You really do have to commit yourself to this.

We're working on a big problem, and it takes time and effort to break the big problem down to manageable bits so we can understand: "Oh, this is why I've been doing this all along. And here's an alternative."

So the path does ask a lot, but it offers a lot as well. And if you think of the alternative—just continuing to suffer again and again in your old ways—it makes sense to give this path a sincere and serious try.