

Why Train the Mind

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We practice meditation because we want a happiness that's reliable and harmless: harmless both to ourselves and to other people around us. We want to find a happiness that doesn't depend on the ups and downs of life. Otherwise, it's like we're riding a roller coaster. Some people get a thrill out of a roller coaster, but the roller coaster of life is one that's built without any safety precautions. There's no building code to make sure that people don't get hurt. In fact, everybody gets hurt one way or another. There comes a point where you get thrown off the roller coaster and you die.

But the Buddha discovered that there's a happiness that doesn't require that we take the downs with the ups, doesn't require that we have to depend on things outside. It's a happiness that comes from within. It enables us to have a sense of well-being regardless of what things are coming in by the eyes, the ears, the nose, the tongue, the body, or our thoughts.

This happiness takes work because it's a skill. It requires that we train the mind, and training the human mind is never easy. It's not all that hard to train a dog or other animal. There was an elephant trainer who came to see the Buddha one time who said the elephants are plain enough. When you train a wild elephant, he said, it takes around seven days to figure out all the tricks the elephant has, and then you can deal with them. But with a human being, there seems to be no end to the tricks and deceits. But it turns out that there is an end. You can master all the tricks of your mind if you work on the skills.

The first skill is to learn how to set a good intention in mind. We'd like, when the meditation starts, to think that the mind will settle down and there will be nice states of bliss and light, or whatever. To think that way is setting yourself up for a fall. If you're focused on the results but not on actually creating the causes or on putting the causes together in the right way, you end up disappointed.

So the first thing to do is to remember that we're here to master a skill that requires learning how to get the causes right. Then the results are sure to come. The Buddha talks about a sense of ease, pleasure, rapture, that can come from getting the mind focused. So we're doing this because we want the results, but we know that if we want the results, we have to focus on the causes. And the main cause is very simple: You stay with the breath.

Focusing on the breath is not all that hard. The hard part is going to be staying. Take a couple of good, long, deep, in-and-out breaths, and notice how it feels. If

long breathing feels good, keep it up. There will come a point, though, when long breathing doesn't feel so good anymore. Then you can change the rhythm and texture of your breathing. You can make it heavier or lighter, faster, slower, deeper, more shallow, shorter, longer. Or you can try in short and out long, or in long and out short. There are lots of ways you can experiment.

Then see how the body responds, see how the mind responds. Remind yourself that if the breath is healthy, it's going to be good for your body and the mind. It's a resource, though, that we usually don't develop. The breath comes in and goes out on its own, so we feel we don't have to worry about it, so we focus on other things. But it turns out that there are many different ways it can enter and many different ways it can go out, and they have an impact on the body. And because of that, they have an impact on the mind.

Make a survey of your body, noticing if there are any places where, when you breathe in, there's tension building up. See if you can consciously relax those spots and still breathe in. Or notice, when you're breathing out, if you tend to squeeze the end of the breath or push it out a little bit too long. See if there's a way you can allow the breath to stop without squeezing it. Before you start squeezing it, you let the out-breath stop, and there will be a slight sensation of floating for a bit, and then you'll know it's time to breathe in again. You don't have to make a sharp line between the in-breath and the out-breath. Just breathe out until you reach a point where you don't push it out, and when the body is ready to breathe in, allow it to breathe in again.

If the mind wanders off—and it probably will wander off—be quick to catch it and remind yourself that whatever the thought it's wandering after, you don't have to complete it before you come back. Nine times out of ten, the thoughts you wander off with are old things you've seen many times before, like old movies. You know what Humphrey Bogart is going to say. So you don't have to listen to it again. And for most of us, our movies don't have Humphrey Bogart, they have people you wouldn't ordinarily pay to watch. So remind yourself that you don't need those thoughts right now. You don't need that kind of entertainment. You're trying to explore something that's going on in your body, an area that nobody else can know: how your breathing feels.

You can begin to see what kind of impact it has on the way the body feels, on how your mind feels. If the mind feels trapped here in the present moment, it's not going to want to stay. It's like trying to keep a child in a house. If you simply lock the windows and the doors, the child is going to figure out how to shimmy the locks and get out. But if you give the child all kinds of neat things to play with,

the child's not going to go. So, in the same way, play with the breath to make the present moment an interesting and pleasant place to stay.

Notice how you perceive the process of breathing. Everyone has a kind of cartoon idea of how the breath comes into the body, how it goes out, and that cartoon idea actually has an impact on how you breathe: As if the body were bellows, you have to squeeze it in, squeeze it out, and the breath can come in and out only through the nose, only through the mouth. But that places lots of limitations on what the breath can do. So try to think of the breath in a different way. Think of it as an energy flow in the body. It flows through the nerves; it flows through the blood vessels. All the nerves go out to every pore, so when you breathe in, there's a sense of energy coming in and out the pores. When you can think of the breath coming in and out from all directions like this, it helps make the breathing a lot easier. You get the whole body helping.

When the Buddha gave breath instructions, he started out by saying to notice when the breath is long and when it's short. As you get sensitive to the way the breath feels, the next step is to breathe in and out aware of the whole body, because that gives you a much bigger foundation. It allows the breath to become a whole-body process, opening up parts of the body that were starved of breath energy before. It makes the mind feel less confined.

If you find it difficult to be aware of the whole body all at once, you might go through the body section by section. Start down around the navel or anywhere else you'd like. Just figure out a way to get through the whole body systematically: navel, solar plexus, middle of the chest, base of the throat, the head, down the shoulders, out the arms, down the back, out the legs. Survey how all the different parts of the body feel with the in-breath, with the out-breath, all the way through the in-breath, all the way through the out. And if you notice there are any patterns of tension, allow them to relax and keep them relaxed all the way through the breathing cycle.

If you have trouble figuring out which parts of the body are more tense than others, you might compare your left to your right side, because all of us tend to hold more tension in one side of the body than in the other. Sometimes it's counterintuitive. There may be a sense of pain or stress in one side of the body, but actually the other side of the body is over-compensating. So try to explore these patterns of tension in your body, and when you can sense them and relax them, make it your sport, make it into your game. You're playing with keeping those parts relaxed even as you breathe in, even as you breathe out. And you'll find that this game opens whole huge areas of the breath energy in the body.

This is the beginning stage of getting the mind trained: i.e., getting it to settle down in the present moment. We want to be here because a lot of important things are happening here, but we don't notice them. We overlook them. The whole reason why the mind creates pain for itself, creates suffering for itself, is because it's not paying attention to what it's doing.

So you want to get clearer and clearer about what you're actually doing here in the present moment. And for that, the first thing, of course, is to get focused here. Just be careful not to allow yourself to slip off, because the mind does have its tricks. You start watching the mind in the present moment, and it points off to the future, it points off back to the past. So don't let yourself be deluded into thinking that if the finger is pointing at the moon, you've got to look at the moon. No, just look at the finger: Why is the person pointing to the moon? What does the mind not want you to see in the present moment? Sometimes its intentions are skillful, sometimes they're not. It likes to hide its unskillful intentions from itself.

So this is one of the things you're going to get to see as you get to know the mind in the present moment. It's got some good capabilities, it's got some good qualities, but it's also got some qualities that are not so good. And we want to develop the equanimity and the equilibrium that allows us to accept the fact that both of those kinds of qualities are there in the mind. Because it's only when you see them and admit them that you can do something about them. You begin to figure out: Why is it that, even when things are going well, the mind can still create suffering for itself?—to say nothing of when things are not going well. How does it interact with sights, with smells, sounds, tactile sensations? Are there more skillful ways of interacting?

In fact, a lot of the skills you're going to be learning as you deal with the mind are things you develop while working with the breath. You need mindfulness. You've got to have mindfulness to keep the breath in mind. You need alertness to watch what's going on. You need discernment to figure out what's skillful and what's not, what's a cause and what's an effect. You learn these skills in a rudimentary way as you work with the breath, and then you can start applying them to subtler things that are going on in the mind.

That's when you really find that there's a potential for true happiness in there, once you develop the skills. You can see through the mind's subterfuges; you can see through all its various tricks; you see through the walls it throws up inside itself. You can deal with all of the committee members in the mind: all the ones who have different ideas about where happiness should be and why you shouldn't be sitting here watching your breath right now, you should be thinking about

something else. As you deal with those voices and can get past them, you find that there are other, subtler ones that have a more pervasive but kind of background, effect on the mind. You begin to deal with those, see through them, basically sort things out inside.

This is how you get to be in charge. The better voices in your mind take over. The ones that already have some wisdom and alertness and mindfulness get stronger. And it turns out that when they're in charge, everybody is a lot happier. There are a lot of members that are going to resist this, but they're foolish. Just like the human beings you see around you: A lot of people would be better off if they learned how to change their opinions. Now, you can't go around straightening everybody else out, but you can straighten your own self out: all the different members of your mind's committee.

So these are some of the skills that we need to develop. And you develop them how? You develop them, to begin with, by learning how to stay with the breath with a sense of ease, a sense of well-being. And that provides the foundation for everything else that you're going to need to know and master in this skill of training the mind.