

Skills for Living & Dying

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As Ajaan Lee says, when you start meditating, that you have to be alert to two things. One is the breath and the other is the mind. Is the mind staying with the breath? How is the breath going? Is it tense? Is it tight? Does it feel constricted? If it does, think of it opening up. Experiment for a while to see what kind of breathing feels good. If there's any tension or tightness in any part of the body, think of the breath going right through, dissolving it away.

As for the mind, keep an eye on it to make sure it doesn't wander off. And its wandering off, you find, has some stages. There will be the stage where it's beginning to think about wandering off but it hasn't yet decided. And then part of the mind has decided it's going to go at the first opportunity it gets. A lot of that discussion is underground. You want to be able to see it because, otherwise you suddenly find yourself off in Illinois someplace, in Siberia, or places even worse than that, and you don't know how you got there. So you bring yourself back. You make up your mind that, next time, you're going to be a little bit more alert to the signs—that you know the mind is planning to go off and you're going to be prepared for it.

As long as there's work to be done with the breath, you have to keep up this double focus—breath on the one side, mind on the other. Because, actually the mind is what we're trying to get here. The breath is basically bait.

If you can work with the breath in a way that feels comfortable, the mind is going to be more willing to stay in the present moment. If you can get that comfort to spread around so that the whole body feels saturated, the mind will be happy to stay here. It'll settle in. It won't be tensed up, ready to go—jumping off at the slightest pretext. When that happens and the breath gets more and more still, then you have just the stillness of the breath plus the mind. And then you can focus all your attention on what's going on in the mind.

At that point, there shouldn't be much going on in the mind—just awareness of the stillness of the body. And you begin to sense that the body is turning into a mist of sensations, and the sense of where the surface or the boundary of the body begins to dissolve away. Then you can focus on the space between those sensation dots or droplets. And then you're with space, realizing that the space is both in the body and spreads out in all directions. You realize that the perception of "space" is what holds you there. When you've learned how to stay solidly with

that perception, you can shift the perception to just the “knowing.” What is it that knows the space? And you’re looking right at awareness.

Now this awareness is conditioned but it’s the closest you’re going to get to seeing the mind on its own: your awareness separate from the things it knows. This is a very useful perception to have. When pains come up and unpleasant things come up, you can just stay with the awareness. They’re there, you’re aware of them, but you’re not rushing into them. This is a really useful skill to develop while you’re meditating and as you go through life. A lot is said about bringing your meditation into daily life, and it’s true: The skills of meditation are not meant to be practiced only while you’re sitting here with your eyes closed. You’ll be able to get some control, so that you can be aware of the body and aware of your mind wherever you go. This double alertness is something you want to take with you wherever you go.

But another important part of bringing meditation into daily life is bringing meditation into daily death. Death is very normal. Like that chant we repeat regularly: “I am subject to aging, subject to illness, subject to death. It’s unavoidable.” In Thai they translate that as, “Aging is normal. Illness is normal. Death is normal.” These things are happening all the time. And one of the Buddha’s gifts as a teacher is showing how to deal with the fact that death is coming. He says you have to be ready for it all the time. His reason for telling us to stay in the present moment is not because the present moment is such a great place to be. It’s because this is where the work is to be done so that when death comes, you’re ready for it. You’re not going to be knocked off balance.

So part of bringing meditation in daily life is just that, remembering that you’re also developing the skills you’ll need when you die. The Buddha realized, as part of his awakening, that the activity of the mind doesn’t need the existence of the body in order to keep on being active. Craving, in and of itself, is enough to sustain your awareness. That’s an important insight, and it’s why the first verse in the Dhammapada is, “The mind is the forerunner of all things.” In other words, the mind, your awareness, is not just the side effect of physical events in the body. The mind is what’s actually driving things. Which means, of course, that when the body dies, the mind doesn’t have to die. In fact, it doesn’t die—as long as craving keeps going, going, going. There’s a verse where the Buddha says, “With craving as our companions, we keep wandering on.”

So at the very least you want to train your craving to go in the right direction. This is one of the reasons why we meditate: to get our cravings under control, get our desires under control. Because desire is an important part of the practice. If you didn’t have the desire to practice, you wouldn’t be here right now. You’d be

off someplace else. If you didn't want to put an end to suffering, you wouldn't practice.

The Buddha says, in effect, "Let's take that desire and focus it in the right direction," i.e., looking at the causes for suffering, so that you'll want to abandon unskillful qualities and want to give rise to skillful ones in their place. In other words, you learn how to focus your desires on the causes. And make up your mind to go in a good direction. If you have to leave the body, you want to go someplace where you can still practice.

These are some of the skills you learn as you're working here with the breath. Even though the breath will stop at the point of death, the skills you've learned will stick with the mind. For one, you'll be alert to what's going on in the mind. Because as the breath gets more and more still, the mind opens up. It's like bringing light into an entire house—including the areas that used to be down in the basement, down in the dark, running things behind the scenes. You've brought light into the basement. You can see what's happening so that you're less likely to be waylaid by distractions.

Because at the point of death the mind will have some choices as to where it's going to stay. If you can stay with that sense of just "knowing, knowing, knowing," then you can look at what's coming up in the mind: the various states of becoming where you could go. Then you can realize, okay, some of them are not desirable. They're not going to be good for the practice. Make up your mind, "If I have to go, I'll go only someplace where it's possible to keep on practicing." The deva levels and the human levels: Those are the levels where it's possible to practice. Your sense of this awareness as something separate will allow you to step back from the things that come up in the mind and would otherwise lead you away.

So the skills we're developing here are useful not only for getting your mind under control as you go through normal events of daily life or the usual events of daily life. They also prepare you for the other normal events, i.e., aging, illness, and death. When illness comes, you learn how not to focus on the pain. This is one of the big skills you have to develop as you're focusing on the breath. All too often we define our sense of the body by the pains that tell us, "I'm here, I'm here, I'm here." We even get to the point where we use the pains to breathe, which is a huge mistake.

The meditation helps you look for where, in your sense of the body right now, there's a feeling of openness, ease, where things are okay. And you'd be amazed to realize how much your mind blots those things out when there's pain someplace else. You have to learn how to open them back up again. They may not seem

especially impressive, but they're there. So use them as a safe place to stay. And think of the breath as being totally independent. Think of it being prior to the pain.

When the Buddha lists the factors of dependent co-arising, the breath is way down there, toward the beginning—as part of fabrication, which is right after ignorance. This means that the breath is prior to feelings. It's prior to our sense of the solidity of the body. What we're doing is trying to bring knowledge to this process of fabrication, this prior element, this prior property. And that liberates it from the constrictions that would come from trying to squeeze the breath into areas that feel really solid or dense or painful.

Think of the breath as prior to the pains, and think of your awareness as prior to the breath. That way, you don't have to be afraid that when the body goes that the awareness is going to go with it. Activities of the mind, as long as there's craving, will keep on going. And when there's no craving, then everything is liberated. The mind goes beyond space and time entirely.

But before you get to that point where there's no craving, you've got to learn how to train your cravings, which is what meditation practice is all about. You don't just follow the mind wherever it wants to go. Make up your mind that you're going to stay with one thing. And learn how to relate to that one thing in a way that makes it easier and easier to stay. In this case, it's the breath. If anything else comes up, you tell yourself, that's not what's wanted right now. This way, pains can come but you're not overwhelmed by them. The pleasure of meditation comes and you learn how to maintain your focus.

The Buddha talks about being developed, as he says, in body and developed in in mind. Being developed in body doesn't mean you go out and lift weights. It means that you're able to overcome pain. In other words, pain can be there in the body, but you're not waylaid by it. To be developed in mind means that you're not overcome by pleasure.

One of the problems when you meditate and as the breath gets more and more comfortable is that you tend to lose your focus on the breath and shift over to the pleasure. But you can learn how to fight that tendency, because otherwise, if you shift attention to the pleasure, things begin to blur out. It's pleasant, it's nice, it's still, but there's not much alertness and not much mindfulness.

And alertness is what you're really going to need as you go through daily life, as you go through daily death. You want to get really alert to what's going on. If a state of pleasure comes in, you don't want to be waylaid by it. If a pain comes in, you don't want to be waylaid by it. You want to have your wits about you. Because there are some pleasant rebirths where you won't have any opportunity to practice

at all. The formless states are totally out of communication with everyone else. So you want to make sure that you're not waylaid by pleasure as you face death, just as you are not waylaid by pain.

There are a lot of really important skills that you learn here as you meditate, which as everybody knows are useful in daily life but they also come in really handy when death comes. This way, the Buddha provides protection all around: a refuge as you're breathing and a refuge when the body stops breathing. He doesn't abandon you. He provides you with the skills you need all the way.

So try to bring the practice into your daily life. Get used to being with the breath. Get used to having this sense of double alertness—being with the body and also keeping track of where the mind is going. Because that particular skill will take you a very long way.