

Meditation as a Skill

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Meditation is a skill, and as with any skill you want to watch very carefully what you're doing so that you can learn how to do it better. In this case, you start out by not doing much. Take a couple of good long, deep in-and-out breaths, and ask yourself: Where do you feel it in the body? We're not talking about the air so much as about the sense of movement in the body as the rib cage expands, the abdomen expands, the shoulders go up, and you may feel a flow of energy in any part of the body. Where do you notice it most prominently?

Focus your attention there and then try to keep it there. One way of making it easier to stay there is to make it comfortable. So ask yourself: Is the breathing comfortable? Could it be more comfortable? You can try it longer or shorter, heavier, lighter, faster, slower, deeper, more shallow.

Experiment for a while to see what kind of breathing feels good. In watching yourself, you have to watch the breath and watch the mind watching the breath at the same time. After all, just because you have the intention to stay here doesn't mean you'll be able to stick with it. New intentions keep coming up with every breath, and you want to make sure you stick with the original intention, which is to stay. This is the training part of the meditation. There will be other thoughts coming in the mind, but you don't have to pay them any attention. Sometimes in fact, if you try to chase them away, it gets worse.

Think of yourself as following a thread in a tapestry. There are lots of other threads, but you've got one particular thread you're interested in so you follow it through as it goes through different designs, different parts of the tapestry. Try to have that kind of focus. That doesn't mean though that the focus is one-pointed. You will have one point that's more prominent than the others, but you want to have a sense of openness in the body. If you make your focus too one-pointed, it gets oppressive to the breath. So you want to think of openness as the breath comes in and goes past that spot. It feels comfortable. Think of that sense of comfort suffusing throughout the body. That's the skill.

You're trying to keep in mind a large frame of reference right here: the body as a whole. Breathe in a way it feels energizing if you're feeling tired, a way that feels calming if you're wired, and if the mind slips off, just keep coming back. If you're going to master this as a skill, you can't get easily defeated. This means you have to want to do this well. That desire is the first of the bases of success that the Buddha taught.

There is such a thing as a good meditation, a successful meditation. There is such thing as a meditation that doesn't go very well. The important part of making the meditation good is that you *want* to do it well and you maintain that desire. You stick with it. Whatever needs to be abandoned in order to attain what you desire, you let go of it. Whatever needs to be developed, you develop it.

That's the next base of success, which is persistence. You stick with it.

Then come the two factors that make this a skill, the first of which is intentness, in which you pay full attention to what you're doing. You're not just going through the motions. You try to be with each breath, as sensitive as you can to how this feels, sitting here breathing. What kind of breathing would feel good right now?

That's the last of the bases of success, which is that you analyze the results of what you're doing. Use your powers of analysis and ingenuity. If something isn't working, try to change to something that does.

These last two factors work together: the intentness where you pay careful attention to what you're doing, and your ability to analyze, to figure out if it's giving good results. If things are going well, how do you maintain them? If they're not going well, what do you change? Those are the qualities that turn this into a skill.

We're trying to make a difference here. If you're with the breath for a little bit and then wander off someplace else and then wander back and then wander off again, it doesn't really make a difference in the mind. It just becomes one more thing in your long list of things to focus on.

Try to give the mind some experience in what it's like to stay with one thing continually. If there's any trouble, think of those four bases for success: You really want to do this, and the desire is not just a brute desire. It's a skillful desire, because it contains some discernment. You focus your desire on sticking with the causes. You're mindful, alert, or as the passage says in terms of right concentration, you have directed thought and evaluation. You direct your thoughts to the breath and you evaluate how things are going. Then the results are going to come: a sense of ease, a sense of well-being, a sense of refreshment. You don't have to create those. Those come as the mind settles in. It feels at home here; it feels comfortable here.

So along with the desire and the persistence, you stick with it and you pay full attention to evaluate how things are going. You find yourself going back and forth among these different bases for success. At any one point, one of them may be prominent, but the important thing is that you have at least one of them, and then the others will come.

So focus on the causes: the directed thought and the evaluation. Evaluation encompasses both the intentness and your powers of analysis to ask yourself something very simple: Does it feel good to be here? What could make it feel better in terms of the way you breathe? The way you focus on the breath?

That's one of the nice things about concentration practice: It's meant to be pleasant. It's meant to feel good. There's a lot of work that needs to be done in the mind, and the concentration—as the Buddha said—is the food that keeps you going. It's a place where you can rest and gather your strength.

It also presents challenges in learning how to get the mind to settle down and stay here as you try to figure out, when the mind is *not* here, how you can bring it back. That's the beginning of the discernment you're going to need in order to see through problems of the mind.

The big problem, as the Buddha said, is that we want happiness and yet we cause ourselves suffering. There's a blank space there in the mind someplace. We don't see the connection between what we're doing and the stress and suffering we're causing through what we do. If you can solve that problem, you've solved everything that really needs to be solved. But it takes strength, because you're going to be dealing with a lot of defilements—things that come up in the mind. Of course, they're "your" thoughts because they're coming up in your mind, and you identify with them. Often you just go with them. As the Buddha said, craving is our companion. It whispers in the ear, saying to do this, do that, and we're so used to running after what it has to say. We think it's our friend. If we don't think it's us, we think it's our friend.

To change that understanding is going to take a lot. In particular, it's going to require a sense of well-being, because a lot of insight comes in seeing where you've been doing things that were really not very wise—sometimes very foolish—and if the mind is in a bad mood and feeling strung out, it's not going to want to admit its mistakes. But if it's feeling nourished, at ease, and comfortable with itself, then it's in a better position to see its mistakes and to admit them and be able to do something about them.

So this is the foundation, your food, your place of rest. This is your home. Look after it well.