

One Step at a Time

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Try to stay with each breath. If it's too much to think about staying here for the full hour, stay with *this* breath, and then *this* breath. In fact, if you start thinking too far ahead, you're going to miss this breath, and you're going to miss the point where the mind slips off. But if you keep things small, keep things manageable, you do a lot better job. So: *this* breath, *this* breath, *this* breath. And as for your past breaths – well, for one thing, they're not here anymore, and whether you were able to stay with them or not doesn't matter any more. What matters right now is this breath. Similarly, breaths in the future are not here for you to look at, either. You can't be responsible now for whether you're going to stay with them then. You will be responsible then if you learn how to be responsible now. So take it one step at a time.

Even when the meditation is not especially easy or pleasant, taking it one step at a time makes it a lot more manageable. In other words, if the breath doesn't seem all that enthralling or absorbing, and there's a pain here or a pain there, it's a lot easier to take it one step at a time.

Back when I was in Thailand, I had a fairly long alms round, and there were days when the rain was just pouring down in buckets. There was no way I was not going to get wet even though I had a big umbrella. The wind would blow, the rain would come from all sides. And when I thought about the whole hour and a half I was going to be out there, slogging through mud, it was difficult to get up the energy just to take the first step. But then I realized, of course, that if I didn't go on my alms round I wouldn't get to eat that day. So I took it one step at a time: this step, this step, this step. You'd be surprised how quickly – when you take it one step at a time – that hour and a half goes, how manageable it is, even when it's raining hard. You're not weighing yourself down with the past or future, with how many steps you've taken, or how many minutes you've been out on the road, and how much longer it's going to be before you get back to a place that's dry. You're right here, right here, right here. And you find that right here is okay, it's manageable. It may not be the most wonderful moment, but at least it's manageable.

This principle can help carry you through a lot. When you're dealing with pain, often the pain gets really bad – not so much because the actual physical sensation is bad, but because you're weighing yourself down with thoughts about how long the pain has been going on, and how much longer it's going to go on in the future. And so all that past and all that future weigh down this one little moment here in the present: No wonder the present buckles under the

weight. But if all the present has to support is just this one moment, you find that it's capable. It can stand up to whatever weight there is in the moment. So the ability to focus exclusively on what's happening right here, right now is a very useful skill.

But it's not the only skill we have to develop while meditating. Some people want to make the whole meditation just that: being in the present moment. But that's only one of the skills we need to develop. There's also the skill of how to *make* the present moment a pleasant place to be. And that requires some memory of the past: what's worked in the past, what hasn't worked in the past. That's called the skillful use of the past. Just as there's a skillful use of the future — having a sense that this practice is going someplace, there's a direction to it, it's going to take you to total freedom.

And as you work on your skills, it's not always going to be a story of stumbling along and falling down, having to pick yourself up, dust yourself off, walk a few more steps, and stumble again. It's not always going to be that way. There comes a time when you really get into the breath and you begin to notice patterns. If you had no memory of the past and no sense of the future, you wouldn't be able to see patterns — the patterns in what you've done, the results that come when you do it. That requires using the past skillfully. Some of your actions will have results in the immediate present, but some of them will take time to show their results. If you don't have that sense of mindfulness — which is what this memory of the past is: mindfulness — if you don't have that mindfulness, you can't learn any lessons. And although each present moment may be a wonderful new beginner's moment, still you don't learn anything from it. Your progress gets short-circuited right there.

So an important skill in the meditation is how to make skillful use of the past, skillful use of the future. The Buddha outlined this in his teachings to the Kalamas, and also in his teachings to his son, Rahula. Notice the intention behind what you do, watch what you're doing while you're doing it, and then watch for the results. See the connections between the type of intention and the type of results you get, either immediately or over time. That's the skillful use of the past.

Unskillful use of the past is when you run back to either getting happy or sad about how things were in the past. Unskillful use of the future is when you start anticipating either with desire or aversion or fear what's going to happen in the future. The one fear that *is* useful is the fear of the consequences of unskillful actions. That's what keeps you on the path in the present. Another skillful use of the future is your anticipation of how good it's going to be when you finally master this. But still, there's no way you're going to get there unless you follow the steps. So learn to recognize when your mind is referring you to the past or the future: What are skillful ways of bringing in the past or the future, and what are unskillful ways? Sometimes a skillful recollection, say, of the future could be,

“Death could come at any time. Are you ready to go? If you’re not – well, what are you doing right now to prepare yourself?” That’s using the future as a spur.

So when you realize that the past and the future do have their uses, you give more dimension to the practice. If this were just a practice of staying in the present moment, we could all go out and have frontal lobotomies and that would take care of it. But it doesn’t work that way. You need some sense of the past. You have to be observant and remember what worked and didn’t work in the past, and then see how those lessons apply to the present moment. Sometimes you have to re-learn a lesson or adjust a past lesson, because what seemed to work in the past may not be working this time. That simply means you have to be even more observant of what’s going on. It doesn’t mean you totally throw out the past. It means you take your knowledge and adjust it, you make it more refined. And this is how the practice develops, as you build on your past mistakes – and on your past successes as well.

So remember that there’s more dimension to the practice than just simply the present moment. But the skill of staying in the present moment is one of the more difficult ones to learn, which is why we emphasize it so much. After all, where are you going to observe things if you’re not really observant of the present moment? If the lessons you learned in the past aren’t working, maybe you weren’t really observant then. This is a chance to get more observant, more precise, with each and every breath.

Learn at which part of the breath cycle you tend to lose your focus. For some people it’s between the in-breath and the out-breath, or between the out-breath and the in-. Sometimes it’s when a particular breath is uncomfortable: You don’t like it, you move off. So learn to watch for any tightness or tension that may appear in the breath. Watch out for the tendency to lose focus in between the breaths. See what you can do to counteract those tendencies. Ask yourself how you recognize the point where the out-breath turns into an in-breath. In some cases it’s very subtle. And we have a tendency, when we’re trying to create a boundary line like that, to make it more clearly drawn than it really has to be. So watch for that tendency as well, because it creates a lot of unnecessary blockage and tension. Try to be with the whole cycle of each breath, all the way through, as precisely as you can.

Then at the end of the meditation you can stop and reflect on what you did, what lessons you learned. Some lessons are immediately obvious. You do something, you immediately get good or bad results. With those lessons you don’t have to reflect too much on the past; they’re right there. Other lessons you learn by reflecting on, say, a bad session: What are you doing? Why isn’t it going well? When you have good sessions, reflect on those after you’re done: What did you do? How did you focus the mind? Take that lesson and file it away for future reference. You may, when you pull it out from your mental filing cabinet, discover that it wasn’t quite as precisely observed as you might want. But you have lots of breaths to watch, lots of opportunities to relearn your lessons.

So this is an incremental path, a gradual one, but there's nothing wrong with that. Fortunately, Theravada never had a Shen-hui, the Rush Limbaugh of the Chan tradition with his sudden Awakening buzz saw, who viciously ridiculed every hint of a gradual path, every hint of a developing skill, as being an obstacle to Awakening. It got so that nobody in the Chan tradition after that dared talk about methods or progress. Fortunately, Theravada doesn't have that problem.

In fact, its problem goes the other way. There's a passage in the *Udana* where the Buddha compares the practice to the continental shelf off of India: a gradual slope and then a sudden drop. The commentaries reinterpreted that to mean *totally* gradual, without any sudden drop. But the Pali obviously says there is a sudden drop. So the gradual slope does take you in the right direction. Without the gradual slope, you wouldn't get to the sudden drop. Without the sudden drop, the gradual slope wouldn't have any real meaning in terms of opening up to something really new. But the way causality works, there is the opportunity for making gradual, very precise observations about your breath, getting more and more skillful as you learn over time. Then you finally hit the point where it all breaks open in unexpected ways. In this way the path is both gradual and sudden.

So as you're working on each breath, each breath, each breath, remember that you're on a path that can take a long time, but every journey requires individual steps. This is why the Buddha called it a path. If it weren't a path, it wouldn't have any direction. But it *does* have a direction, and the gradual steps are good steps to take. Not all the good things are saved to the end. But ultimately – as you get more and more precisely in the present moment with more skill, the skill that you've learned from the past – those gradual steps suddenly open up to something totally Other. And it's all found by looking right here; you don't have to look anywhere else.

This is one of the amazing things about the Buddha's teachings: All the great lessons we have to learn are right here. We don't have to speculate about some event way back at the beginning of the universe – that's not relevant. We don't have to pin our hopes on a judgment day at the end of the universe – that's not relevant, either. The relevant things are what we can see for ourselves, right here, right now. Things change: Well, how do they change? Is there a pattern to their change? Watch right here and you'll find out. Watch in a way that grows more precise over time by learning how to make skillful use not only of the present, but also of your memories, and your anticipation of where you want this to lead you in future. Learn to use these things properly and they all become part of the path.