

## *Start Out Small*

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Focus on your breath. And as for what's going to happen when you focus on the breath, put that thought aside. And where the meditation is going to take you and how it's going to take you there: Put those thoughts aside as well. Be careful not to anticipate too much, because when you know too much in advance, it's not really knowing. A lot of it is guesswork. A lot of our preconceived notions come from ignorance. That's precisely what we're trying to get rid of, and yet our ignorance shapes the way we practice. So when you meditate, it's important to clear away as many of those expectations as possible. Just be with the breath: When the breath comes in, know it's going in; when it's going out, know it's going out. That's all you really have to know right now. As for what's going to happen with the next breath or the one after that, wait until those breaths come.

Ajaan Fuang once noted that we now have lots of books on meditation, lots of explanations, and in some ways it's a help, but in other ways it's a hindrance — a hindrance in that many of our perceptions and memories picked up from books and Dhamma talks clutter up the present moment. They actually get in the way of seeing what's going on. And this gets compounded with our general impatience: We want to see results fast, and in order to make them happen fast we squeeze them too much in the direction we think they're supposed to go. But a lot of the genuine results of the meditation have to come from simply allowing the causes to do their work, to develop on their own, without your having to push them too much in any particular direction. So if you see your thoughts leaning into the next moment or what's going to happen further on in the future, just pull back to stay balanced right here, right now. Look after the causes, and the results will take care of themselves.

As Ajaan Lee often advises in his talks, start out small. Notice where you feel the breath, and then watch it. If it doesn't seem comfortable, you can nudge it into what seems to be a more comfortable direction. Don't be in too great of a hurry to go on to the next step, because we want to come from a position of strength, of real knowledge, as we meditate.

There's a passage in the Canon where the Buddha says a person who doesn't have a basic level of happiness and inner goodness simply cannot do goodness. Sounds like a Catch-22, but that's not the point. The point is we all have a certain amount of goodness in our minds, and so we should tap into that first. The goodness here not only means good intentions but also a good-natured attitude toward what you're doing, a good-natured attitude toward the people around you. That's why we recite that chant on goodwill every night. You have to bring

a certain level of humor to the practice: the humor that allows you to laugh at your mistakes without getting bitter. When you get bitter, you start lashing out at people around you. You start criticizing the techniques – there are all kinds of things you can criticize. But if you can sit back for a minute and tap into your own basic good-natured attitude – and it's there inside all of us – try to bring that to the fore, and then work from that. It may be a small thing, but you've got to start small.

Start with what you know. The breath is coming in. You know that? Yes, you know that. It's going out. You know that? Yes, you do. Okay, know just that much. Don't forget that. Is it comfortable or not? Well, you may not be sure. Could it be more comfortable? Experiment and see. Try to sensitize yourself to how the breathing feels. Without this level of sensitivity, the meditation becomes mechanical. When it's mechanical, it becomes a chore. And when it's a chore, the mind will rebel. So ask yourself: What really feels good when you're breathing right now? If you can't figure out what really feels good, hold your breath for a while until the mind comes to the point where it's screaming at you: "Breathe! You've got to breathe!" Then, when you breathe, notice what feels really good as you breathe in. Take that as a guide.

We in the West seem to be especially cut off from our own bodies. We're so much in our heads that the area of the body becomes unexplored territory, like those old maps from the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries that would show distorted coastlines of continents with big blank spaces in the middle. "Here be tygers," they would say. Who knew what was in there? It's the same with the body: We know a little bit about it, but there are huge unexplored areas inside.

So take as your beachhead this one point where you know the breath is coming in. You know the breath is coming out. You know whether it's comfortable or not, and you begin to get a sense of what adjustments can be made to make it more comfortable – so that it feels really good just breathing in and out right there.

As for the other steps in the meditation, put them aside for the time being. Make sure you've got this step well under control. The people who try to take on too much at once are the ones who end up not mastering anything at all. Even if your progress is incremental, at least it's progress. You're building solidly on a solid foundation. That's what matters. Otherwise the meditation is like a ladder that you lean up against an unstable wall: You may be able to climb very high, but when the wall falls down, you're going to be in really bad straits. Try to build step by step on a solid staircase. Build on what you really know.

As for what you've heard about how the meditation is supposed to develop – even if you've had experiences in the past when it's developed in interesting ways – put all that aside for the time being. Don't let it clutter up your mind, because any progress in the meditation has to come from being very solidly focused on the present moment, fully intent on what you've got right here. If a

lot of expectations are cluttering up your view, you're not going to see what you've got right here. Whatever progress you make won't be genuine.

So, as Ajaan Lee says, be willing to be dumb about the meditation. Sometimes this is called "beginner's mind," but for me it's always been more effective to think, "Be dumb about it." The "dumb" person is the one who sees when the emperor isn't wearing any clothes.

You may have heard a lot about meditation, but how much do you really know? You *do* know right now that the breath is coming in, you know it's going out. You know if your mind is with the breath or if it's wandered off. Focus on being really clear about what you know, what you're directly experiencing, as continuously as possible. The continual clarity is what actually creates the state of concentration you're looking for, the developed mindfulness you're hoping for. It starts with these incremental steps.

So, whether the results come fast or slow, be sure that at least you're getting the causes right. And they're simple: Be with the breath, all the way in, all the way out. Just this breath. And if the breath is uncomfortable, you can adjust it. You're not required to breathe in a particular way, and you're not required to refrain from influencing the breath. The mind is always going to have some influence on the breath, whether it's conscious or not, so it might as well be conscious. If you pretend that you're not influencing the breath, the influence goes underground. It's better to learn how to be open about the fact, to be sensitive to what's going on.

And this simple exercise, if you allow it to do its work, will bring the results you want. In fact, it will bring results better than you might expect. If you clutter up your meditation with your expectations, that's all you'll get: things that seem to fit in with your expectations. But if you allow it to be a little bit more open-ended, you create possibilities for other things to happen as well – often better things, more genuine.

So have faith in the process. If you've got the causes right, the results have to come. Even though what you're doing right here may seem a small thing, remember: All the great things in the world had to start out small. Coastal redwoods, the tallest trees in the world, come from the tiniest imaginable seeds. So even though the seed may be small, don't underestimate its potential. This spot where you're with the breath may seem to be a small thing, but as you get down into it, you find that there's a lot there. In fact, the Buddha's whole teachings on causality have one big consistent point: that whatever's happening in the universe, the basic pattern is something you can discern right here in the present moment.

In chaos theory they call this "scale invariance": the patterns on the large scale, on the macro scale, are the same things happening on the micro scale. And you've got the micro scale right here. On the macro scale you see that even scientific theories keep changing – sometimes very fast. They're not anything you can directly observe, for they're based on so many assumptions. But on the micro

scale, right here in the present moment, with your mind on the breath, all the basic processes you're going to have to know for Awakening are occurring right here. It's simply a matter of getting more and more sensitive right here.

So, even though it may seem like a small spot, it's got a lot of potential. It's like those seeds they have in Thailand – I've forgotten the name of the plant, but it has a seed with the diameter of a quarter. If you break the shell and stick it into about three or four gallons of water and come back a few hours later, it turns out that these little noodle-like strands inside the seed, which were sitting there waiting to soak up water, now fill your entire three- or four-gallon container.

This small spot in the present moment is like that: There's a lot to tease out in here. So don't be disdainful of its potential. Learn to start out small, and those small things are going to reward you. Like the old fable of the mouse and the lion: The lion saved the mouse's life, and later on the mouse was able to save the lion's life, even though the lion originally was pretty disdainful of what the mouse claimed it would be able to do. But it could; it could eat right through the net in which the lion was trapped. And so this little present moment you've got here: Don't step up on it, hoping that you're going to get someplace higher. Focus right here. Really give it a chance to open up. Whether it opens up fast or slow – that's not the issue. The issue is that you give it the space, you give it the time, you're patient enough and watchful enough to allow it to open. And someday it will eat through the net in which you keep catching yourself.

When we say that big things grow from small things, it's not that they have to grow in such a way that other people might notice. It's just that what's there in the present moment becomes a lot clearer. The intricacies of what are going on right here play out in a much larger perspective – if you give them the time to develop.

So, start out small. If you have to be small for a long time, that doesn't matter. What matters is that the progress, when it comes, it's solid.