

Effective Self-Discipline

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Meditating on the breath is something simple, but it can be hard to do. It's simple because it's right here. You don't have to borrow someone else's breath. You don't have to go down and buy it at the store. It's nothing far away or abstract. It's simply the sensation of the energy in the body as it brings air into the lungs and when it expels it. It's right here.

What's hard about it is sticking with it—the quality of persistence. Looking at your breath every once in a while is not going to make much difference in the mind. It makes a difference only if you really stick with it over time—continuously, again and again and again. That can sound like drudgery. And an important skill in meditation is how to make it not-drudgery, to make it interesting, something you enjoy doing—or even when you don't enjoy it, simply finding the inner strength to stick with it. And this requires discipline.

The word “discipline” in English has a lot of unfortunate associations. We tend to think of stern disciplinarians, the people who beat children. Those are harsh disciplinarians—but they're not essentially effective. Effective ones are like the teachers who disciplined you and you hardly even noticed that you were being disciplined: the ones who got you to behave by capturing your interest. As when you were in school, they were the ones who made you want to learn or feel inspired by the subject, the ones who could reason with you to get you on their side.

As a meditator you need these same skills. The Buddha's teaching comes in a lot of lists. And it's interesting to notice the role that persistence has in almost all of them. But it's also important to realize that persistence is not just brute effort. It's an effort to be skillful—to figure out what works in helping the mind to alleviate its burdens, alleviate its suffering.

So right effort requires not only effort but also understanding. This is why it's interesting to see what precedes persistence in the lists—for, after all, the lists are often meant to be sequential. You develop a certain quality first, and then it makes it easier for you to be persistent.

In one of the lists, the quality that precedes persistence is desire. You want the results—and don't be ashamed of that desire. It's important to have the desire to get the mind to be peaceful, to get the mind to understand itself. If you didn't have that desire, you wouldn't be here. You'd off some place else, down at the beach, looking for happiness. So sometimes it's useful to remind yourself of why you're meditating, of what you want out of the meditation.

Desire comes from seeing the positive benefits that comes from meditation and also thinking about the negative consequences of not meditating, of not getting the mind under control. We see horrendous people give in to their anger, give in to their greed, give in to their fears, and they end up doing things that they regret for the rest of their lives. That's simply because they had no control over their minds. They often knew that what they were about to

do was going to have bad consequences, but they went for the quick fix anyway. Or they couldn't imagine themselves not giving in to those impulses.

Then there's the whole issue of aging, illness, and death. Even if you live your life wisely and in a sort of a normal everyday way and don't get into trouble, there's still trouble waiting for you. The body grows old and doesn't ask permission to do so. It gets sick—again without asking permission. And then when it dies—it takes everything. And most people are not prepared for this. This is one of the things that meditation is really good for—it gets you prepared, because you learn how to invest your happiness in something that doesn't age, grow ill, or die. It's like learning to invest your money in a place that's not going to be subject to wars, fires, floods, or earthquakes. So one way to encourage yourself to be persistent in meditation is to think about the positive results that come: the genuine happiness, something that goes deep down inside.

Sometimes it's good to read the texts on this. The people who struggled with their practice and then finally gained awakening—they talk about how the struggle may have been difficult but was more than worth it when the results came. So it's good to keep that desire alive.

In another list, desire is preceded by an understanding of what's skillful and unskillful. In other words, you realize that you can't just sit around and hope for good things to magically happen. This is not Barney the dinosaur's world. If you want good results, you have to make sure that the causes are good as well. This is what keeps desire from getting in the way of the meditation. You realize that if you want results, you have to focus your energy on the causes. You have to focus your attention on them and get them right. Right now the causes are being mindful of the breath, being alert to the breath, and being ardent as you stick with the breath. Those are the issues you focus on.

Sometimes it seems paradoxical. On the one hand, we're looking for big results here—the deathless, the unconditioned, nibbana. And where are we told to look?—"Look at your breath and just keep looking at your breath." But as Ajaan Lee says in one of his Dhamma talks, great things start out from little things. Trees come from little seeds. People come from little tiny, tiny embryos. And it's your sensitivity to the breath that's going to develop the discernment that helps you see even more subtle things inside.

We're focusing on the breath not to get the breath but because being with the breath trains a lot of really good qualities in the mind—mindfulness, alertness, sensitivity, persistence. At the same time, as you really pay attention to the breath, you begin to notice that certain ways of breathing are helpful for concentration and others are not. This makes it easier to stick with the breath as you see that there's more than just sticking with it—coming in, going out, coming in, and going out. You see that there are variations in the breath, subtle changes in the breath that can have an impact on the body and an impact on the mind.

There's a lot to explore in the breathing. There's not just the in-and-out breath. There's also the sense of energy that flows along the nerves throughout the whole body. Can you sense

that? There's a sense of energy that flows through the blood vessels. Can you sense that? Do you see how they are related to the way you breathe in and out?

There's also a very still level of energy in the body—you focus on certain spots on the body where everything stays still no matter what. Even with the breath going in, the breath coming out, there's a sense of stillness there. Can you locate those spots in the body? And when you've located that stillness, can you think of it spreading to fill the whole body, so that you can tune into that level of energy. It's like there are many levels of energy, many frequencies of breath in the body. If you're really skilled, you can tune in to them by choice.

So there's a lot more to see here than just in and out, in and out, in and out—"When the hell is it going to end?" There's lots to explore; there's a lot to understand. If you're the sort of person who likes puzzles, enjoys figuring things out, then there's a lot to figure out here—how you relate to the sense of body as you feel it from inside. When you look at the breath as something to explore this way, you'll find it a lot easier to stick with it—because there's always something new to learn.

Another quality that precedes persistence in some of the lists is conviction: conviction that all of this is worth it, that this really will work. In the beginning of the practice, you gain conviction from the fact that it simply makes sense: that training the mind is going to help in other areas of your life, and that what you do does really have an impact on the happiness or unhappiness you experience. You may have seen this principle at work in some parts of your life, but it's one of those things you can't really know for sure until you've really explored it. So in the beginning you have to take it on faith—that we're not living in a totally deterministic world or totally random world, and that it really is worth the effort to try to develop a skill, particularly in the area of the mind. There's enough orderliness in this world that the skills you learn today are going to help tomorrow. At the same time, things are not so deterministic in an iron-clad way that you can't make any difference. You *can* make a difference by the choices you make, in the lessons you learn. And making good choices today will help you make better choices tomorrow. That's something you take on conviction. That can help further your persistence in the practice as well.

So it's good to keep in mind these qualities: the ability to remind yourself of why you want to meditate, conviction that it really will make a difference, and then understanding that you're working on cause and effect here. You're not simply sitting here waiting for a spiritual accident to happen or hoping that awakening will come up and whack you across the head. The discernment, the understanding that lead to awakening are things that you develop through your discernment and understanding of little things that are happening right here, right now.

This principle applies not only to your meditation but also to your daily life. This is why right action, right speech, and right livelihood are part of the path. Be careful about what you do, be careful about what you say, notice cause and effect in your actions, because the actions themselves have an impact; words have an impact. And your ability to understand that impact

is going to be really important all the way down the line.

Finally, one quality that's not mentioned in the lists, but you notice throughout the teachings: There's a part of the Canon called the Vinaya, which is the monastic discipline. This is what we're working on here—we're disciplining ourselves. And each of the rules in the Vinaya has a story. The story is there to help you understand the rule—and you don't obey the rules simply because the Buddha said so or somebody else said so. There's a reason for each rule, and it helps to understand the reason. It's also interesting to notice that a lot of the stories are really humorous—with a wry, quiet kind of humor. I think that's for a purpose. If the discipline were nothing but harsh and heavy rules, people would rebel. But being able to look with humor at the misdeeds that inspired the rule gets you on the side of the rule. You see through those people's hypocrisy, you see through their denial of what they're doing. And their foibles are presented in a way that's funny. Your ability to laugh at them helps you get on the side of the rule.

The way this translates into the practice is that you have to have a good sense of humor about what you're doing. When things don't go well, don't get frustrated. Learn to laugh at yourself and move on—because what does a laugh do? It helps you distance yourself from small, narrow ways of thinking. You step back a bit. You step out of that particular personality, that particular identity, that's so wound up and tight in a particular issue. Step back from it a bit. Get a larger perspective. That larger perspective is part of wisdom.

So these are some of the qualities that help with persistence, help with discipline. There's the desire for the results; the conviction that what you do does make a difference, and then that a genuine happiness really is possible; the understanding of cause and effect; and finally a wise sense of humor.

We tend to live very much in our own little worlds, and an important part of meditation is learning to step back from our worlds and not believe them. Just stay with the sensation of the breath coming in going out. Thought worlds come along and they can tell you all kinds of things, using all kinds of voices—shouting voices, whispering voices, seductive voices, harsh voices—that in normal circumstances gets you running with them. But now you're trying to step out of those worlds. You're trying to resist the allure of those voices.

As you do, you come to understand that the perspective provided by the breath is what makes the discipline liveable, so that it doesn't feel harsh. But it is effective.

Part of the wisdom of learning to be a good meditator is learning how to discipline yourself well. There's nobody standing here with a whip to force you to stay with the breath. When you sit here quietly with your eyes closed, you could be thinking about anything in the world. It's up to you to discipline yourself to make sure that you really are sticking with the breath and that you are getting something out of the experience. So learn how to do it effectively—because it makes all the difference in the world.

