

Changing Your Default Settings

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People who study positive psychology tend to report that they found that most people have a pretty constant level of what they call “happiness quotient” throughout life. In other words, regardless of how wonderful or how horrible the events may be in their lives, of how sudden or how radical the changes, people tend to find a certain balance, a certain level of happiness that they feel comfortable with, and they don’t deviate much from that. The strong changes in life may get them down for a while or get them up. But like a scale that’s been out of balance for a bit, the mind tends to go back and find its old balance.

This reflects one of the Buddha’s teachings – that the things that make us really happy and miserable in life are not so much the events outside that can have a huge impact on us in one way or another, even in extreme cases. It’s the inside things. Outside things have an impact because those events get into us and really change the way we perceive things, change the way we think about things, feel about things, breathe around things, even. But most people pretty much stay with their same perceptions and their same ideas, and even the way they breathe stays pretty much constant, so after a radical change they tend to go back to the level they were at before.

If there were nothing you could do about this, life would be pretty miserable. If you had a low happiness quotient for a good part of your life, that would mean you’d tend to expect to have it for the rest of your life.

But fortunately, these things can be changed—and not by looking for events outside. You want to turn around and see, “What am I doing to shape my experience that tends me toward this low level of happiness?” Or after an event that’s been an especially bad experience to go through, “How do I get more quickly back up to a more tolerable level of happiness?”

This is a matter of the questions you ask yourself, the things you pay attention to, what your intentions are around things, the way you perceive things, and the kind of feeling tone you tend to carry around in the body and the mind. The Buddha has a technical term for these aspects of what we’re doing in the present moment: He calls it *name*. These are the things that the mind does in preparation for shaping your experience.

One of the reasons why we meditate is to give us some new skills in this area. Your intention now is to stay with the breath, to stay with one thing continually. And you can add to that the intention that you want to make this as pleasant an experience as possible. That means you're going to be focusing on the feeling that you're trying to create here. And then you hold to a perception of the breath: a mental image. It can be either a picture in the mind, or just a word or whatever, of how you conceive the breath, and how you hold the concept of breath in mind. You hold on to that: both to the sensation of the breathing itself and to the perception.

And then you ask questions about it. This is what attention is about. When the Buddha teaches attention, he doesn't teach bare attention; he teaches *appropriate* attention, which means that you learn how to ask the right questions. For the sake of the meditation, the questions are: "Where are you focused? How is the focus going? Could it be stronger? Is it too strong? How is the breath? Is it a good place to stay? What adjustments would be useful to get it to be nicer? What's the feeling tone you're getting out of this? And how about your perceptions—are they actually helping get the breath settled down, or they getting in the way? Can you change them?"

There's a fair amount of thinking that goes into this; you've got to strategize to get the mind to settle down. After a certain amount of strategy, when it works, you can let up a little bit. You don't let up on the strength of your focus, but you let up on the thinking. Give the mind a chance to really settle in and rest.

One of the purposes of all this is that you begin to see these processes in action. Get a sense of what the Buddha is talking about when he says "perception" or "attention." Then learn how to turn your sensitivity to these process on other aspects of your life as well. One obvious target, of course, is disruptive thoughts that come up in the meditation. You can ask yourself, "What's the feeling tone around that?" You can move in to the physical side, too: "How are you breathing around it?"

With disrupting things, usually there's going to be an uncomfortable breath to go with it. Or sometimes there's a very pleasant breath to go with it, when you're thinking about things that you really like. One appropriate question there would be, "Okay, if it feels that nice to think about that, can I breathe that way as I focus back in on the breath? Can I maintain that nice feeling in the body, so that I don't have to associate that pleasant feeling *only* with that thought. Can I have

that pleasant feeling with the breath?” If you can, you’ll be more inclined to stay here, which is much more useful place to stay.

If there is a disturbance with a sense of tension around it, you can ask yourself, “How can I breathe around that so that it doesn’t take hold of the body, so that it doesn’t hijack the body?” Then if a thought has a particular appeal, you can ask yourself, “What’s the perception that you hold around it? What do you think you’re getting out of thinking this thought? What’s the gain?” If it’s a thought that you keep coming back to, there will be a perception of gain some place: that you’re getting something out of this. You’ve got to learn how to question that perception. Ask yourself, “What’s the intention around the thought? What are you hoping to get out of this?” A lot of times it’s just entertainment in the present moment. Sometimes there’s no real intention at all; it just kind of wanders off. But there may be an intention hidden in there, so you have to ask these questions, probe around a little bit.

And as you get more and more used to these building blocks of how you put things together in the present moment, you can start things apart: things like unskillful thoughts, unskillful emotions. Just take them apart. You don’t have to *squash* them. Lots of people get into trouble because, when a thought comes up that they don’t really like, they squash it. And it just creates all sorts of problems, in terms of the breath, in terms of how things get sorted out in your mind. Because there will be times when those thoughts come back and try to squash *you*.

So you want to learn how to step back from them a bit and say, “Okay, what is it that’s going into these thoughts? What’s the appeal? What’s the perception? What’s the way of breathing around it?” Can you take that apart? Can you look at the intention? You can look at the perception and say, “These are things that I don’t really want,” or, “Do I really believe these things? No!” “What *do* you believe?” Carry on a conversation like that, and you can find yourself pulling out of those thoughts, out of that way of perceiving things. Then you can reconstruct some more skillful thoughts and also some more useful feelings.

In other words, you learn how to get in touch with the feeling tone around your thoughts, and you can begin to realize that many times it’s pretty arbitrary. Some thoughts have certain associations with them, and as soon as those associations come, you start breathing in one way. With other thoughts, other associations, you breathe in another way. Look at the thoughts that are actually getting you to breathe in a way that’s really comfortable. You’ll see that “This is where the pleasure in that thought lies.” It doesn’t lie in the content of the

thought so much as in the sense of the energy in the body that feels good around it. See if you can remove the thought and keep the good energy.

This is another reason why you don't want to just go squashing everything, because sometimes some thoughts are able to get you in touch with comfortable breath energies that you couldn't get in touch with otherwise. So you get into a comfortable breath through the backdoor.

What this means is that although you may have been living with a general feeling tone of your life, you don't have to stay stuck at that particular feeling tone. If you find that your general default mode is pretty low, ask yourself what kind of feelings you're creating in the present moment by the way you breathe. We tend to think of the present moment as a given – it's just the way things are. But it's not – you're already breathing around it; you're already doing other things to it. You're already bringing a feeling tone to things. So why not bring a better one?

And if part of the mind says, "Well, this is artificial," you can argue: "Do you think that your other thoughts are not artificial? Your other feelings are not artificial?" Just because they happen to be there right now doesn't mean that they were not created by your past intentions; they were. They were all fabricated. So as long as these things are put together, you have the right to put them together well.

When you're going through a bad period of life, it's the same sort of thing. You don't have to add any extra suffering on top of it by breathing in a way that's weighing you down, or perceiving the issue in a way that's weighing you down. Look at your perceptions; look at your attention, i.e., what questions you're attending to. The complaining questions—"Why is this happening to me? Why does it have to be that way?"—are not at all helpful. Focus on questions that actually would be helpful, such as, "What am I doing right now that's adding unnecessary stress and suffering to the situation? What can I do to drop some of that?"

So these four elements – feeling, perception, intention, attention – are things you want to get a good sense of as you meditate, and then learn how to use them well as you go through life. That way you can shape your interaction with yourself and your interaction with the world in a way that's as light as possible, and adds only the minimum amount of unnecessary stress. That will get you well started on the path.