

## *Listen to Stress*

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Part of developing a skill is remembering which approaches worked among those that you've tried. As we meditate, we're developing a skill. For skill to develop, you have to remember which ways of focusing on the breath, of conceiving the breath, of playing with the breath in the past have enabled the mind to settle down. It's good to have that knowledge on tap. But you don't want it to get in the way of seeing what's actually going on. It's possible to over-determine or over-predetermine what's going to happen in the meditation. If you notice that things aren't settling down properly or that they're not quite right, just put aside what you've learned in the past and listen to what the breath is telling you. Listen to what the body is telling you. What does it seem to need? What does it seem to want? What kind of breathing? In other words, make a really careful survey of what's actually going on. Listen carefully. Be open to new things.

Notice where there's discomfort in the body or in the mind, and what kind of breathing might help the situation. What might the body want to do? Where is the body not quite settling down? Where does the mind not feel quite secure or snug with its object? Then, pose this question in the mind: "What could be done here?" Don't be too quick to answer—although, at the same time, see if there's an immediate response coming from an unexpected quarter.

After all, we're coming from ignorance. The problem with ignorance is not that we don't know anything at all. We know a lot of things but they're irrelevant or actually harmful to what we're trying to do. But now we're trying to get around that. We don't want to be a prisoner of past kamma, a prisoner of our old preconceived notions. Sometimes we're dealing not only with known unknowns, but also unknown unknowns. The only way to learn from them is by looking at what the Buddha said is The Big Issue: Where is the stress? By definition, if we're doing something wrong, there's going to be stress somewhere. If there's any lack of skill in our attitudes, in any of the ways we fabricate our experience, it's going to result in stress.

So, we have to learn how to sensitize ourselves to where that stress is, because it may be in an unexpected place or may it show itself subtly, in unexpected ways. Our lifeline out of where we are right now is finding the stress and learning how to comprehend it, what's connected to it, what's needed to put an end to it. In some cases, it's fairly obvious; in others it's not. The really difficult cases are when people get into very strong states of concentration and see no stress at all, like the Brahmas the Buddha dealt with. In one case Baka Brahma was convinced that he had attained the ultimate attainment. The Buddha had to show him that there was something more, something higher. When you get into subtle states of concentration, it's very easy to believe that any little remaining stress is totally understandable, natural, and nothing to get worked up about. And that's as far as you get. That view alone blocks any further development.

Regardless of where you are in the meditation, that nagging stress somewhere is often your lifeline out. That is what can get you out of the hole of your ignorance. Again, we're learning how to look at things in terms of where there's stress, and what's causing it. So learning how to sensitize yourself to what seems to be lacking right now, what seems to be needed right now, and allowing yourself to pursue those lines of inquiry, is how you open the way.