

The Stages of Meditation

Thanissaro Bhikkhu

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The Buddha's teaching can be called a serious pursuit of true happiness. Remind yourself of that every time you sit and meditate. This is why we chant the passages for *metta*, or goodwill, before we meditate together: to remind ourselves that we really do wish for happiness, *true* happiness. Everyone wishes for happiness, but when you look at the way people go about looking for happiness in their lives, you wonder exactly how much serious thought they give to what they're doing. True happiness has to be something that doesn't change, that doesn't depend on conditions, which means you can't look for it in ordinary places. You have to look in an extraordinary place: your awareness of the present moment, something that's right here all the time but that we tend to overlook. When we're meditating we're turning inward to look for true happiness right here, to see what we've been overlooking for so long.

And each time we meditate we remind ourselves of our main intention, which is to find that happiness, a happiness good not only for us but also for the people around us. After all, when we're not creating unnecessary suffering for ourselves, we're lifting a burden not only off of our shoulders, but also the shoulders of the people around us. So we wish not only for our own happiness, but for the happiness of all living beings.

The reason we have to remind ourselves of this is because in the course of focusing on the breath, focusing on the present moment, all kinds of thoughts are going to come up to pull us away. If we're not clear about why we're here, we're not going to stay here. We're going to go running off someplace else. Another reason is that thoughts of goodwill are good comfortable thoughts to think. It feels good to remind yourself that, yes, you do want true happiness. You really do want living beings to be happy, all living beings, without being picky about this person or that person. You want to be generous with your goodwill. By creating that kind of attitude, you create a good space to settle down in the present moment.

Even though we may aim at focusing directly on the awareness of the present, it's a difficult place to focus. So we give ourselves crutches to get there. The breath is one of these crutches, as are thoughts of goodwill. When we've extended goodwill in every direction, we focus on the breath. When the breath is coming in, know it's coming in; when it goes out, know it's going out. That's all you have to be aware of right now. The other things, the mice crawling around in the ceiling, the sounds off in the distance, just let them be. All you're responsible for is this awareness of the breath coming in, going out. If you want, you can use a meditation word to go along with the breath. Traditionally they use the word 'Buddho,' which means awake: 'Bud' with the in-breath and 'dho' with the out, 'Buddho,' 'Buddho,' or just 'in,' 'out,' whatever word feels comfortable to help you stay with the breath.

Then you can focus on how the breathing feels. This is a very immediate, visceral way of showing goodwill for yourself. There's no need to breathe in an uncomfortable way. And yet because we pay so little attention to the breathing, we usually leave it to its own devices. As a result, the breath gets shaped not by our awareness, but by other emotions that come through the mind. It gets shaped by our unexamined thoughts about how breathing happens. And so the breath gets constricted, parts of the body don't seem to be participating in the breathing process.

Ideally the breathing process should be a whole-body process. Your whole nervous system should be involved. For that to happen, though, you need to give the breathing your full attention. Try to notice what kind of rhythm feels good right now. Long breathing, short breathing, deep, shallow, fast, slow: there are all kinds of variations to the breath. You've got a whole hour to test them, to see what rhythm feels best right now, what texture to the breathing feels best right now. If you're feeling tired, you'll want a rhythm of breathing that gives you more energy. If you're feeling tense, you'll want a rhythm that helps you relax.

In the beginning you can focus on any part of the body that feels comfortable to stay focused on, feels easy to stay focused on, and where you can easily keep track of the breath. Try to create a nice relaxed feeling tone right there. Normally when we're focusing on something we have a tendency to tense it up, which is not what we want right now. We want to be focused with a sense of relaxation, a sense of ease, a sense of openness. The energy in the body should be allowed to flow naturally in, flow naturally out. And then when you've got one spot in the body where you can maintain that feeling tone, you can allow that same feeling tone to spread to other parts of the body, so that as you breathe in there's nothing in the body that gets tensed up, as you breathe out you're not holding on to tension in any part of the body.

You can go through the body systematically. Start around the navel and just go up the front, section by section. Watch each section for a couple of minutes as you breathe in, breathe out, and notice what kind of rhythm feels good for that part of the body. If you feel any sense of tension or tightness there, allow it to relax. And then you move up to the next section, say, the solar plexus, and then the middle of the chest, the base of the throat, the head, down the back, out the legs. Starting again at the back of the neck, go down the shoulders and out the arms until you've covered the whole body. You can go through the body this way as many times as you like, and you'll find that all kinds of benefits come.

The immediate benefit is a clear sense of wellbeing in the present moment. It just feels better to sit here when you're sensitive to how the breathing is going and to how you can change it to make it feel even better. Each time you go through the body, you find that you get more and more sensitive to parts that you may have been holding in subconscious tension for a long period of time. You can finally allow that tension to relax and let go. You find it easier and easier to inhabit your body in the present. When the body in the present is more comfortable, the mind feels more inclined to stay here.

So the benefits are not only physical. They're also mental: a sense of ease, a sense of wellbeing. Your mind grows more and more still, at the same time it's more alert and

more aware. Our usual tendency when things get comfortable in the body is to fall asleep. But here we're working at comfort *mindfully*, with as much alertness as we can muster. That creates a different quality to our awareness in the body. It feels both still and energized.

Then the next trick, once you're able to do this, is to learn how to maintain it. All too often the mind says, "Well, been there, done that. What's next?" But this is the sort of place that, if you really want to get to know it, you have to stay for a long period of time. You have to become familiar. You have to become friends with the body—the kind of friend who sticks with a friend no matter what happens, the kind of friend you'd like to trust. Try to be that kind of friend with the body. When you do that, you find that the breath in the body reciprocates. It becomes a good place to be, a nice place to stay, a place you can trust.

But there's a separate skill in, one, learning how to get here and, two, learning how to stay. The thoughts will come up: "Well, this is boring. What's next?" So say, "No. Who's bored? Who's saying that?" Start questioning those thoughts. Don't believe everything that comes through your head. Don't believe everything you think. Just see the thought as an energy pattern that comes and goes. You don't have to give it any more reality than that. You don't have to give it any more credence than that. Learn to be on the lookout for any kind of thought that pushes you away from the present moment. Instead of getting entangled with it, just allow it to dissolve while you stay with the breath.

You begin to see that you can start anticipating when a thought is going to arise. You feel it as a stirring, a disturbance in the energy field of the body. Just allow that sense of disturbance to relax, allow it to iron itself out, and the thought will get aborted. This way you don't have to engage in a conversation with every thought that comes into the mind. Just take the thought apart before it forms and that makes it a lot easier to stay here for long periods of time.

As you stay here longer and longer, one, the mind gets stronger, your awareness of the present moment gets stronger, the sense of wellbeing of the body gets stronger, goes deeper; and, two, you start seeing and understanding patterns of the mind that you never saw or understood before. This is where the practice starts giving rise to insight, where you start actually *using* your meditation.

Ajaan Fuang, my teacher, once said that there are three steps to meditation: one is learning how to do it, in other words how to get the mind to settle down; the second step is learning how to maintain it, how to keep it there; and the third is learning how to put it to use. What good is a centered mind, this state of wellbeing, this state of centeredness that we've got here? Well, in addition to giving a sense of wellbeing in the body, it helps you to understand what's going on in the mind. You can learn how to sidestep a lot of the emotions that used to take over. You see them as a process that arises and falls away within this larger field of awareness you're developing. That way they don't sneak up on you from behind to take over your awareness. You see them as they come and you have a sense of which thoughts are worth thinking, which ones are not. You can disarm the thoughts that aren't helpful and engage only the ones that really

are worth thinking about. And you get a quicker and quicker at sensing which is which, which ones lead to happiness and which ones will lead to suffering. You can start undercutting the ones that lead to suffering, step by step by step. You gain more control of the mind and see exactly where it's getting in the way of the happiness you're trying to find here in the present moment.

You begin to realize that the big problem is not the things that come from outside. It's what the mind does to itself, the ways it forces itself to think, the ways it ties itself down to ideas and attitudes that cause stress, suffering, and pain. When you stop getting engaged in those patterns, you find a sense of happiness, a sense of wellbeing that lies deeper still, even deeper than the sense of concentration. This gets you closer and closer to the kind of happiness that the Buddha was talking about, a happiness that doesn't depend on conditions. There will come a point in the meditation when things open up, where at that point you're not doing anything more, just simply allowing these things to open up on their own. And you finally reach a dimension in the mind that, as the Buddha said, is not conditioned, that doesn't depend on anything at all. That's where the true happiness lies.

So this process here is one of digging in, looking for gold, and when you find things that are obviously not gold you throw them away. When things look like gold you have to test them, because there's fools gold, you know. But the basic test is this: Is it something that's constant or inconstant? If it's inconstant you know it's going to be stressful, nothing you want to identify with. No matter how much you've cherished a particular type of thinking or sense of your own identity, you begin to realize how those things get in the way of true happiness. You're finally willing to let them go.

So use this test for gold to check everything out. As you run into things that are fools gold you put them aside; more things that are fools gold, put them aside. As you put them aside, things open up, there is less getting in the way.

The genuine gold is already there, it's just a question of not being willing to settle for anything less.