

Sowing Good Seeds

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Focus your attention on the breath. Ask yourself: Where do you feel the breath in the body? Where do you feel the energy of the breathing? Sometimes it's at the nose, but sometimes it's not. It's more down in the chest and the abdomen. And if the diaphragm expands, it's not just the diaphragm. Other parts of the body move as well. So, notice where you sense the breathing most clearly and focus your attention there. Try not to tense up around that spot. Allow it to feel comfortable as you breathe in, comfortable as you breathe out. Think of it as a porous sensation. The edges aren't too well defined. If you define the edges very tightly and very precisely, it means you're probably tensing up around it.

It's important that you be comfortable with the sensation of breathing. If you're not comfortable with it, the mind is not going to want to stay. Like pushing an inflated ball down under some water: As soon as your grip relaxes just a little bit, the ball comes shooting up out of the water and into the air. The same with the mind: If the mind is uncomfortable with the breath, it's going to shoot away as soon as it can, as soon as you're the least bit careless. So do your best to be on good terms with the breath. After all, it's the energy that's keeping you alive.

If you have trouble staying with the breath, you can use a meditation word along with it. The traditional one is *buddho*, which means awake. That's the quality of mind you're trying to develop here: a mind that doesn't go off into the dream worlds of future or past, but stays right here with what's happening in the present.

Everything in life grows out of the present. All the seeds are planted right here. Just as a seed can determine whether a plant is going to be a mango or an avocado or a weed, in the same way we plant the seeds for our experience right here in the present moment with our intentions. Everything in the world is here in the present moment on a small scale. And the whole purpose of the meditation is to bring the mind into the present moment so we can see what's going on, so we can make sure that only good seeds get planted.

Watching here, we learn how the seeds get planted, how different seeds come to be. There's an awful lot going on in the present, but for the most part we miss it. We sit here and we look and look and look and don't see anything: just breath coming in, going out, then the mind wandering off some place, coming back a

bit, grabbing a sandwich, then running out again. So we have to learn how to look more carefully, to be as sensitive as possible to what's going on. First with the breath: The more you develop your sensitivity to the breath, the more you begin to open up to other things in the present moment as well.

So, learn to be a connoisseur of your breathing. What kind of in-breath feels good right now? What kind of out-breath feels good? How do you conceive of the breathing, and what effect does that have on the sensation of the breathing? If you feel the breath as something in your nose that you've got to pull down into the body, it's going to have one kind of effect on your breathing. If you think of it as something coming in and out the pores of the skin on all sides, that will have another effect on the way you experience the breathing. You begin to see it's not just a physical process you're watching here; there's a mental component as well. But in the beginning, try to keep it as simple as possible. Stay with the breath coming in, going out, focus on that one issue: what rhythm of breathing feels best, what depth of breathing feels best right now.

As soon as it starts feeling comfortable, you have to spread that sense of comfort. This doesn't mean you have to push it out. Just allow it to spread, allow it to seep throughout the body. Whatever sense of ease comes with the in-breath and the out-breath, make sure you don't tighten things up in between the breaths. That sense of openness between the breaths can then spread out and fill the whole rest of the body. This is important, because as the breath starts getting subtle—and it will as the mind settles down—as it gets more and more still, you need less and less oxygen, so the body left on its own will breathe less and less. The sensation of the breath will get more and more refined.

If you're not really observant, if your foundation is not really solid, you get lost. Either you wander off to what is called delusion concentration, where the mind is still but doesn't really know quite where it is. Or else you fall into an air pocket, kind of drop out of sight for a minute, and come back up again. That's a sign the breath has gotten too refined, more refined than you can follow. So the best way to counteract both of those problems is as soon as the breath starts feeling comfortable, you can spread that sense of comfort throughout the body. You can go through the body section by section, starting at the back of the neck, at the navel—you can start anywhere, as long as you're systematic enough to cover the whole body, eventually, section by section. Notice where there's tension or tightness in your posture, notice where there's tension or tightness in the breath, allow things to relax so that the feeling of the breath can spread anywhere in the body at all.

Once you've surveyed the body a couple of times like this, you can settle down in one spot. Think of the sense of ease of the breathing spreading out, seeping out through the whole body. Then your only responsibility is to

maintain an awareness that covers the whole body. It'll have a tendency to shrink, so watch out for that. Just think of your awareness spreading out in all directions. We have a tendency to think of our mind as facing the same direction as our eyes. Our awareness seems to be facing forward. But when you close your eyes, there's no need for the mind to be facing forward. It can face in any direction at all. Try to make it 360 degrees and then maintain that state. Be as continuous as you can in your focus on the breath. The continuity of your focus is what makes all the difference.

It's like a needle in a record—back in the old days when they had records. If the needle stayed in the groove continually, you could actually hear what was on the record. And it sounded nice. If it was music, it sounded like music. If it was speech, it sounded like speech. But if the needle started jumping around, all you'd have was screeches and scratches, and it was a real distraction, painful to listen to. You didn't get anything out of it. Then same holds true when staying with the breath. If you just jump around here, jump around there, you don't get much out of sitting here. But if you stay continually with the breath, all the way through the in-breath, all the way through the space between the breaths, then all the way through the out-breath, continually, continually, it begins to make sense. It begins to have an effect on the body. It begins to have an effect on the mind.

So there's nothing much to do. Just stay here in the present moment, stay with the breath. The insight comes as your powers of observation get more and more refined. And then you'll find that there really is a lot going on right here. But in the beginning you want to keep it as simple as possible. If you get bored just staying with the breath, try exploring how different ways of breathing will have an effect on the body, until you can determine what rhythm is best. It's not just a matter of tying the mind down to the breath. You want to explore the breathing process because that develops your powers of sensitivity, and it's through your own sensitivity that you're going to gain discernment.

We all read about how Buddhist meditation leads to wisdom and discernment. Well, it's not a matter of programming yourself to see things in a certain way. And it's not a matter of sitting here and waiting for discernment to drop on you out of the sky. The act of trying to be sensitive to the present moment is what develops your powers of discernment. As your powers of discernment get sharper, you start seeing what's actually going on. There are directions to recommend that you look at a certain aspect of the present moment, or that you ask certain questions in the present moment, but unless you have developed your own sensitivity, you're not going to see anything. You can convince yourself maybe that you've seen things that you've read in books, but it doesn't really make that much of a difference in how the mind relates to itself unless you actually see for yourself.

A lot of the insights that you're going to gain are uncomfortable truths about yourself, about how you've given into greed, anger, and delusion when you really knew better—and how you've tried to cover up the evidence. So this is one of the reasons we try to make the breath as comfortable as possible. When the mind has been nourished with a comfortable breath, the body has been nourished with a comfortable breath, you're in a much better mood, much more open to admitting the truth. It doesn't feel so threatening, because you realize at the same time that you're developing the mental qualities you need not to give into greed, anger, and delusion again. So the insights come not in a threatening way, but with a certain sense of relief. You've gotten past something, you've outgrown a dishonest way of behaving. You don't have to cause yourself that kind of suffering anymore. When you're not causing yourself that kind of suffering, you're not causing other people that kind of suffering either.

So the meditation is like a seed. You plant the seed of staying with the breath, of being mindful, being alert, being persistent, and it grows into a greater and greater sensitivity, greater and greater stability, a sense of well-being, clarity, maturity of mind, as you outgrow childish habits. So make sure you're planting a good seed right here. Plant the best seed you can. Tend to it, and it'll grow.