

## *Fighting off Ignorance*

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The Pali word for meditation, *bhavana*, means development, because when you're meditating, you're developing good qualities of mind.

For instance, while you're focusing on the breath, to stay with the breath you have to keep it in mind. You can't let yourself forget. Otherwise, you'll go wandering off in your old ways. That ability to keep this one thing in mind is called mindfulness. Every time you breathe in, try to remember that this is where you want to be, this is where you want to stay.

Another quality you're developing is alertness, which is what helps you to check to see what you're doing. Are you staying with the breath? Are you wandering off? If you catch yourself wandering off, come back.

That develops a third quality of mind, which is ardency. You've really got to stick with this. Simply thinking about the breath for a minute or two and then wandering off doesn't accomplish anything. But if you keep coming back, coming back, coming back, it's going to make a difference. It's like the muscles in your body. The ones that you don't exercise begin to atrophy; the ones you do exercise, as long as you feed yourself properly, begin to grow.

So the more you exercise qualities like mindfulness, alertness, and ardency, the stronger they become.

Then you start using your powers of evaluation: How does the breath feel? Do you like the way it feels? How about if you breathed in a different way? Ajaan Lee recommends starting out with some good, long, deep in-and-out breaths. In other words, very consciously make the breath long, then see how it feels. If it feels good, keep it up. If it doesn't feel good, you can change. You have to exercise your own sensitivity as to what feels good, what doesn't feel good. If you're not sure, stick with what you've got for a while until you know for sure: This is having a good or a bad effect on the body; it's easy for the mind to stay with this kind of breathing or it's hard.

You can also experiment with where to focus. Are you going to focus at the tip of the nose, middle of the chest, the abdomen, the middle of the head, the base of the throat? There are lots of places you can focus your attention. Each of them will have a different effect. So check to see for yourself which is the best place to stay right now.

As you develop your powers of evaluation, that develops your discernment. As you become more sensitive to this part of your awareness, you realize it really does

have an impact both on the body and on the mind. You can decide whether the impact is leading in the direction of more stress or less stress, and you can see that the less stress you create for yourself, the better the position you put yourself in, both for your own sake and for the sake of the people around you. When you're weighing yourself down with stress and problems, you're a weight not only on yourself but also on the people around you. So the meditation is a gift both to yourself and to others.

So this simple exercise of staying with the breath—if you understand what you're doing and you stick with it—develops a lot of good qualities in the mind. Again it's like exercising the body. If you want to develop strength in your arms, you have to understand what do your arms do, and then you stick with the exercises that fit in with what they do.

But strength of mind is a lot more important than strength of body, because it comes down to this old issue of suffering. The Buddha gave 45 years of his life to teaching the issue of suffering and the end of suffering, for he saw that as the most important problem in life. We all want happiness but we cause ourselves suffering because our minds are ignorant and weak.

Some people in his day taught that suffering was something you had to accept because that's just the way things are. You're forced to suffer either by the creator of the world, by impersonal fate, or by your past actions, so you just have to put up with it. But that's not what the Buddha taught. He saw that the reason we suffer has something to do with past actions, but it also has an awful lot to do with our present actions. If you develop good qualities of the mind, like mindfulness and alertness, along with your powers of evaluation and discernment, you begin to see exactly what you're doing that's causing suffering—by the way you think, by the way you breathe—and you realize you have an alternative. You don't have to think that way. You don't even have to breathe that way. You can change.

As the Buddha explains, all the causal factors of suffering start out with ignorance. Then, conditioned by ignorance, we fabricate our experience. Some of that fabrication comes in from the past, but a lot of it comes in the choices we're making right now. For instance, you can choose to ignore the breath or you can choose to pay attention to the breath. You can choose to breathe in different ways. You can actually breathe in ways that make your body sick. In fact, a lot of people do just that. They carry tension around in their bodies because they're breathing unskillfully.

Along with the fabrication of the breath, there's the way you frame thoughts and ideas in your mind. This is called directed thought and evaluation. You focus on certain things as being important and then you evaluate whether they're good

or bad, what you want to do about them—that kind of thing. This is classed as verbal fabrication, which can be either skillful or unskillful. If you're doing it under the influence of ignorance—i.e., you don't understand what's causing suffering and what's not, what you could do to put an end to it—your thinking tends to be unskillful. You tend to focus on other issues. When you're focusing on other issues, a lot of stress builds up—and not just ordinary garden-variety stress. Sometimes you can cause yourself a lot of suffering simply by the way you talk to yourself.

Then finally there's mental fabrication: your feelings and perceptions. We tend to think of feelings—i.e., the feeling tone of pleasure, pain, or neither pleasure nor pain—pretty much as a given. But if you look at the way you react to certain sensations in your body, you begin to see that you have an element of choice. Sometimes a sensation is perfectly neutral, but you decide you don't like it and you turn it into pain. Or vice versa: It's pretty neutral, but you decide you like it and so it becomes pleasure. That's very much related to the other type of mental fabrication, which is perception, the labels you put on things: “This is good; that's bad. That's pleasure; that's pain.”

Or when pain comes, you have a particular mental image of the pain that can actually make it worse. Say that pain has taken hold of your knee. Actually, pain doesn't hold anything. You've simply taken your different sensations—the form sensations of warmth, solidity, movement, and coolness—and you've mixed them up with the pain. This is especially bad if you glom the solidity together with the pain, so that the pain feels solid. It's as if you couldn't feel your knee without the pain, or you couldn't focus on the form sensations of knee without pain. They all get confused.

This is how ignorance creates a lot of suffering right out of the gate. You breathe in ways that create suffering. You think about things and label things in ways that create suffering all because of your ignorance. So when you're developing good qualities of mind, you're learning to fight back against your ignorance. When you're mindful, when you're alert, you develop your powers of evaluation and discernment. You develop the powers of concentration. All these things work together to create an area of awareness in the present moment. And in that area, you can begin to fabricate in a way that causes less suffering. When you fabricate with awareness rather than ignorance, it all turns into the path.

We start with the breath, being aware of the breath coming in, going out. Notice when it's comfortable; notice when it's not. Realize that you have a choice in how you're going to breathe. Nobody's forcing you to breathe in an uncomfortable way. Even if they were to throw you into prison and torture you,

they wouldn't know how you were breathing. And if you could focus properly, you could learn how to breathe comfortably even in miserable situations.

So it's good to know that you have this power here to create a sense of ease and well-being inside that doesn't have to depend on outside conditions. That's a valuable lesson right there.

As for your directed thought and evaluation, for the time being you simply want to direct your thoughts to the breath and evaluate the breath. Be very deliberate in what you're going to think about.

As for the labels you put on things, think of the whole body as breath energy. See if that makes the breathing easier. When you breathe in, think of energy coming in and out every pore of your body. There's a basic level of energy in the body that's present whether you're breathing in or breathing out. Be careful not to squeeze that energy as you breathe out, or to stuff it in as you breathe in. Let the energy come in and out with a sense of ease.

Then, when the breath is comfortable, it's wise to start moving your focus around, to notice how the breathing feels in different parts of the body. Otherwise, you may tend to drift off into the comfort. So make a survey. A good place to start is down around the navel. Watch that area for a while as you breathe in, breathe out. If you notice any sense of tension or tightness there, allow it to relax. Then move up the torso: to the solar plexus, the middle of the chest, the base of the throat, the middle of the head. Then, starting at the back of the neck, go down your spine, down your legs, out to the toes, even your little toes. Then start again at the back of the neck and go down your shoulders, down your arms, out to the fingers, and again even to your little fingers and the spaces between the fingers.

Anywhere you sense tension or tightness, allow it to relax. Think of the breath coming in and out the whole body. It's not air coming in and out, of course, but there is an energy flow that can flow smoothly if you relax all the muscles going out to the skin. As you hold that perception in mind—the perception of breath energy flowing without obstruction—you find that the actual experience of the breath gets a lot more comfortable. A sense of fullness can develop.

What you're doing here is taking the power you have to shape your experience of the present and learning how to use it with awareness. Not with ignorance, but with awareness. In this way, even just sitting here without any outside stimuli, without all the activities you're used to doing, you can create a sense of well-being in the body that's totally independent.

This is just the beginning of the practice. But I can assure you, you do have the ability to affect how you experience the present moment totally independently of

what's actually happening in the range of your senses. After all, the primary causes of suffering, as the Buddha said, start with ignorance. This doesn't mean ignorance of a particular teaching so much as the ignorance of not paying attention to the issue of where's the stress, what's causing it, and what can you do to put an end to it. Think in those terms. And then, in that context, develop the skills you need.

The knowledge that the Buddha is talking about here is not an either/or kind of thing, where either you know it or you don't. It's more like the gradually developing knowledge that comes with a gradually developing skill, because each of the four noble truths has a skill, a task appropriate to it. You try to comprehend where there's stress, where there's suffering, so you can see the cause. You come to see that the cause is your craving, which is really unnecessary. When you see it as unnecessary, you can drop it. To do that requires powers of mindfulness, alertness, and ardency, all of which are developed by the path. And as you learn to appreciate the ways in which suffering grows less and less, you're approaching the point where you can realize the end of suffering.

So we're working on a skill here. This is why the Buddha's path is a gradual one. If it were simply a matter of knowing or not knowing something, it would be instantaneous—you'd get the knowledge, and that would be that, the end of the problem. But here it's a skill, and skills take time. You get more and more sensitive. As you see through the more blatant levels of stress, you put yourself in a position where you can see ever more subtle levels of stress, and you learn how to work through those as well.

Ultimately, you get to a point of completion when you've fully mastered all the skills appropriate to all the four noble truths. The image the Buddha gives is of going out in the ocean until you reach the edge of the continental shelf—which, as you go to the east of India, is very much like the continental shelf off the eastern coast of the United States. The ocean floor slopes off very gradually, and then there's a sudden drop.

So as you work on this gradual path bit by bit by bit, you learn things, you see things you didn't see before. There may be setbacks, but you learn how to take the setbacks in stride. Gradually you make more and more use of this potential you have for shaping your present experience so that you're not just a victim of past conditions. You're taking an active, alert role in making your present moment a better place to be.

Finally, when all of these skills reach a point of completion, there's a sudden opening, where you touch in the full awareness of your mind and body what the Buddha calls the deathless, something totally free of conditions. But you don't get there without following this path of conditions. You're reconditioning yourself,

exercising these qualities of mind—alertness, mindfulness, and ardency, your powers of evaluation and discernment in the concentration that allow you to watch things very carefully and very consistently. These are the things that fight back ignorance so that you can shape the present moment in more and more skillful ways until it opens up. Then you don't have shape anything anymore.

It all starts with these very basic exercises: strengthening your mindfulness, strengthening your alertness. Each time you catch yourself wandering off and you bring yourself back, it may feel frustrating but the bringing yourself back is a good thing to do. This is how you get stronger. You keep coming back, coming back, coming back. You don't give in. You realize that this is the sort of training you have to do for yourself. Nobody else can do it for you, and it doesn't get easier as you get older.

So now's the best time to work on it because it really does make a difference: the difference between whether you're going to suffer or not. When aging comes, when illness comes, when death comes, when difficult situations come in life, if you just thrash around and blame the difficult situations, you're not helping anything at all. You're making the situation worse. But if you realize even when things get difficult that you have the power to change the way you breathe, change the way you think, change the way you label things, change the way you evaluate the potentials of your situation, so that even in the midst of difficult situations you can be free from suffering, then you can make a difference, because you're alert, mindful. These qualities have been strengthened. Your powers of discernment see where the best place is to focus, what the best way is to understand the situation, because you've evaluated all the building blocks that you use to create your experience in the present moment.

Remember: You have a lot of power in your hands. The problem is that you don't use it properly because of your ignorance. But as you banish ignorance, fight it back with each and every breath, you can make more use of that power and take it all the way to the end of suffering. That's what this path promises. But even if you don't get all the way to the end, at least you've learned that you don't have to be totally a victim of things. You have the ability to make a difference each time you breathe in, each time you breathe out.

So keep exercising your mindfulness, alertness, and ardency to the end of the hour. That's how you make them strong.