

Training Heart & Mind

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The Pali word for meditation is *bhavana*. It means to develop. You're trying to develop the mind, develop the heart—because the Pali word for mind, *citta*, also means heart. You're working on qualities of heart *and* mind, and you start with a very simple exercise, staying with the breath.

Watch the breath as it comes in; watch it as it goes out. You can focus on any part of the body where you feel the movement of the breath or the movement of the body, because the breath in the body is not just the air coming in and out of the lungs. It's the movement of energy throughout the whole nervous system as you breathe in, as you breathe out. It causes the chest to rise or the abdomen to rise. It also has some subtler effects on other parts of the body as well.

Any places where you notice there are sensations that tell you, "Now the breath is coming in, now the breath is going out," you focus on those sensations. As you focus on them, don't clamp down on them. Allow them to have their freedom, because as you get more and more familiar with the sensations, you begin to realize that they really do spread to affect the entire body. If you clamp down, you block that energy flow, which actually makes the body more uncomfortable, more restricted and confining.

So simply keep track of the fact that now the breath is coming in, now the breath is going out. Let it come in and out with a sense of ease, as if every pore of the body were open, and the breath could come in and out from anywhere, so that you don't have to pull it or push it. You don't want the breathing to be a laborious process. You can pose questions to the mind: What kind of breathing would feel best right now? Do you want a soothing breath? Do you want an energizing breath? What does the body need? What would the mind like?

One of the qualities you're trying to develop here is concentration, which is combined with mindfulness and insight. Some people think that concentration practice is different from insight practice, but as the Buddha pointed out, you need both stillness and insight to get the mind concentrated, and if you want to get insight, the mind has to be solidly concentrated. So all these qualities go together. It's a unified practice; we're developing many qualities at once.

The first question of insight is: Where are you causing yourself unnecessary stress and how can you stop? A very simple way of working on that question is to notice how you're breathing. In what areas of the body do you put unnecessary pressure on the breath? In what ways do you squeeze the breath out when it goes

out—which is not necessary? Or in what ways do you make the breath either too short or too long?

Pay some careful attention to the breath. Give it your whole mind; give it your whole heart. Make it something you're really interested in and really want to learn about, not just a dry, intellectual exercise. It should involve your whole dedication. That's the heart element. You realize there's so much suffering in life. And who are you going to blame? You could blame the economy; you could blame the political system. But even in the ideal economy, the ideal political system, people would still suffer. There would still be suffering in your heart and mind. That's what we want to work on: the unnecessary suffering that the heart/mind causes itself. So that's what we're here to investigate: to learn how we're creating unnecessary suffering, unnecessary stress even in simple things like the way we breathe.

In dependent co-arising, the Buddha says that from ignorance comes fabrication. Fabrication is the way the mind orders, interprets, and shapes its experience from the raw data it gets. There are three kinds of fabrication: physical, verbal, and mental. Physical fabrication is the breath—the intentional aspect of the breath. If we do that in ignorance, we're going to cause ourselves unnecessary suffering and stress right there at the beginning of the causal process. So instead, we focus knowledge on the process: Be aware, fully aware of the breath.

The second kind of fabrication, verbal, is the internal verbal fabrication—the way the mind talks to itself. Again, we tend to do this in a lot of ignorance. The mind just chatters away about all kinds of stuff: yesterday, tomorrow, last week/next week, last month/next month, this person/that person, over here/over there. If you were to draw a map of where your mind was chattering in the course of the day, it would be a tangle all over the place.

So you want to bring some awareness to that process as well, and you can do that by consciously directing your inner conversation to the breath. You're going to talk about something to yourself? Talk about the breath. How is the breath doing? Does it feel right? Where could it feel better? Once it feels good, how can you maximize that pleasure? For the mind to settle down and be really still, it needs a sense of ease and well-being. So when you notice that the breath feels good, think of the breath energy spreading from that comfortable sensation, allowing it to flow around different parts of the body.

In this way, you're also bringing awareness to mental fabrication. The things that fabricate your mind are your perceptions and your feelings of pleasure, pain, and neither pleasure nor pain. You're holding on to the perception of breath. Every aspect of the body can be perceived as a kind of breath energy. There's a

breath side to all the parts of your body. There's got to be an energy in there. Otherwise, you wouldn't be able to move your legs or move your arms. Everything would go dead. There is energy there already. So perceive it that way. Instead of thinking of your arm as solid, think of it as energy. Focus on that aspect of your arms, that aspect of your legs, the head, the feet, the different parts of your torso. In that way, you make it easier for the comfortable breath energy to fill the whole body.

As you do this, you're developing right concentration, which the Buddha once said is the heart of the path, and you do that by bringing awareness to physical fabrication, the breath; verbal fabrication, your thoughts in thinking about the breath and evaluating the breath; and then mental fabrication, the feeling of ease that comes from the breath together with the perception that stays with the energy aspect of your body. This helps to eliminate a lot of the dis-ease and the burdensomeness that the mind tends to place both on the body and on itself. At the same time, you're providing your heart with what it wants. It wants some pleasure and ease in the present moment, so you give it some.

The Buddha's path is not meant to be an "eat-your-peas" kind of path; it's meant to provide you with pleasure, ease, and well-being along the way, because when insight comes, it's going to start questioning a lot of things that you've been holding on to, habits you've had for a long time. And a lot of insight basically comes down to seeing ways in which you've been willfully stupid, willfully ignorant, willfully insensitive. It's not a pleasant message. The mind is in the right position to see this when it's still, but you also have to put the heart in the right mood to admit the truth of the message, the truths about how you've caused yourself and other people unnecessary suffering.

In other words, you're preparing both the heart and the mind for insight. But as I said, it's not the case that you wait until the mind is fully concentrated to get some insight. You need a certain amount of insight into the processes of fabrication in order to get the mind to settle down. Why you're meditating, what ways of breathing are more comfortable than others, how you can use the breath: These are aspects of insight that get you into the concentration.

So you're working on a range of qualities here—both the stillness and the insight. Concentration, the discernment, mindfulness, a sense of well-being: All of these things should come together. But fortunately, you don't have to think about all of them all the time. You just think about the breath and pose those questions in the mind: "What kind of breathing would feel good right now? When it does feel good, how can I maintain that sense of ease?" Just be still with it, and let it spread. If it doesn't feel good, what can you do to make it more comfortable?

Nobody's forcing you to breathe in an uncomfortable way. Try to expand your ideas about how the body can breathe—how the body is affected by the breath—and you find that there are a lot more possibilities here than you might have imagined.

In this way, both the heart and the mind are trained—given a good, solid place to stay—so that, coming from that place, you can see things clearly, in the same way as when scientists set up an experiment, they have to put the equipment on a good, solid table or in a good, solid location that doesn't move around a lot. If it moves around a lot, the measurements are going to be worthless. But if the table is solid, you're more likely to get precise measurements. You can see things more clearly when you stand still. At the same time, when the heart has a sense of ease and well-being, it's more willing to admit that, "Yeah, I have caused suffering, and it wasn't necessary. But I *can* change my ways." The heart is more willing to listen, in the same way that it's a lot easier to speak to someone when they're well-fed and well rested than when they're hungry and tired.

So for both of these reasons, try to get the mind as still and as settled as possible with the breath so that you can see more clearly what's going on. And particularly, you can apply principles of what's called appropriate attention, i.e., asking, "Where's the suffering? Where is the stress right here? Where is it unnecessary? What's causing it? How can those causes be changed?"

It's in this way that the meditation leads to the end of suffering. But it doesn't save all of its pleasure and goodness for the end. An important part of the practice is learning how to create the sense of well-being and to maintain it along the way. That's the heart of the path. The other factors, the Buddha said, are requisites for that, and then they in turn can build on that. But make sure the heart is healthy and strong, and then everything else will fall in line.