

Three Levels of Effort

April 30, 2010

First get your body into position. Try to sit straight, facing forward, your gaze level. Close your eyes. Place your hands in your lap, right hand on top of the left.

Then get your mind into position.

We just had that chant on goodwill. Try to recall it: the desire for happiness, a desire for true happiness for yourself and for everyone else. Remember that true happiness comes from within, which means that your true happiness doesn't have to conflict with anyone else's. So send thoughts of goodwill to as many people as you can think of, even people you don't know.

That establishes the right orientation for the meditation. You're here to find true happiness. You're not going to find it by looking around and seeing where in the body is a little package of happiness, or where in the mind is a package of happiness. It comes by developing skills. That takes time; it takes energy. But it's energy and time well spent, because the rewards are solid: a happiness you can depend on, a happiness that causes no trouble for anybody. That's something really special.

But to find that happiness, you have to develop good qualities of mind. This is what the meditation is for. The Pali word for meditation, *bhavana*, literally means developing. You want to develop mindfulness. Once you've made up your mind you're going to follow a particular path, you have to keep remembering that. You can't let yourself forget. And as we all know, the mind has lots of strategies and techniques by which it lets itself forget things, especially when the new habit or the new aim goes against a lot of old, entrenched ones.

So you want to be mindful. You also want to be alert to see what you're actually doing. You want to develop concentration so that you can stay focused: The mind gets settled in; you develop a sense of ease and well-being here in the present moment and can see things clearly. And particularly, you can see what the mind is intending to do: all the different intentions that come through. If you want to see them, you have to watch them here in the present moment.

This is why we focus on the breath, because the breath is our anchor to the present moment. You can't watch a past breath; you can't watch a future breath. You can just watch this breath right here, coming in and going out. So take a couple of good, long, deep in-and-out breaths. See how it feels. Where do you feel the breathing? We're not talking just about the air coming in and out of the lungs, but also the movement of energy in the body.

Where are the sensations that tell you: “Now the breath is coming in; now the breath is going out”? Focus on those sensations. Stay with them all the way through the in-breath, all the way through the out-. This is where mindfulness gets developed because you have to keep remembering you’re going to stay right here with the sensation of the breathing. You’re not going to allow yourself to slip off. If you do slip off, then as soon as you notice it, come right back: all the way through the in-breath, all the way through the out-.

Each time you come back, ask yourself what kind of breathing would feel really good right now as a reward for coming back. Then if something feels good, stick with it. If it doesn’t, you can change. You can experiment—longer breathing, shorter breathing, deeper, more shallow, heavier, lighter, faster, slower—until you find a rhythm that feels really good. Then stick with it as long as it feels good.

After a while, you’ll find that the needs of the body change, so the kind of breathing that’s going to feel good will also change. So allow it to change. Keep exploring; keep on top of this. This is how you develop alertness. If it gets mechanical, everything goes onto automatic pilot. You go wandering off and start thinking about tomorrow or yesterday, this person or that person, because you’re not fully engaged.

Think about this. You’re focusing on the energy of life—the breath coming in and the breath going out—and you’re trying to pay attention to how it feels in the body. Think of the breathing as a whole-body process. Notice where in the body there’s tension that feels like it’s blocking the breath, or there are ways that tension builds up with the in-breath, or you hold on to tension with the out-breath. See if you can breathe in a way that doesn’t build up that tension, doesn’t hold on to that tension.

There’s a lot to explore here. You’re not just holding yourself clamped down to the breath without any wiggle room and with nothing to do. Think of the meditation as learning about the energy of life right here, how it’s nourishing your body. Is it nourishing? Or is it just hardly allowed to nourish anything at all because it’s so restricted? If it feels restricted, allow it to open up a bit.

You’re trying to establish a comfortable place here because if you want to stay in the present moment, you have to make the present moment comfortable. Otherwise, you’re going to keep leaving.

Another term for meditation is *vihara dhamma*. It means literally a home—the qualities of mind that you can take as your home—and if your home’s not comfortable, you’re not going to want to stay there. So you move in and figure out: What do you want in this house? Where do you want light? Where do you

want your sofa? Where do you want your bed? Where do you want the kitchen? What kind of food are you going to have in the house? In other words, learn how to inhabit this place with a sense of well-being, with a sense that you belong.

As for your outside concerns, learn how to let them go. This is going to take effort, and you're going to find yourself slipping off. Well, come right back. There's nobody here to scold you for slipping off, but you do want to be firm with yourself. Each time you slip away, say, "Wait a minute. That's not what we're here for. I'm not here to think about tomorrow. I'm here to learn about the mind, to strengthen the mind, to develop good qualities in the mind because that's how happiness is found."

So setting things up like this is going to take a while, especially if you haven't meditated before. But it's a first step that everybody has to follow through with. The Buddha talks about three levels of skillful effort. The first level is just this: giving rise to skillful qualities in the mind and learning how to let go of anything else that pulls you away. At the moment, "skillful" means just this: Whatever helps keep you stay here is a skillful thought, a skillful intention. Whatever pulls you away is not skillful. Just let it go, let it go, let it go.

The second level of effort, when you've learned how to establish something skillful like this, is to learn how to develop it. In other words, you learn how to maintain this sense of being centered inside in as many different situations as you can master, so that when you get up from the meditation and walk away, you can still stay centered inside. That takes some coordination; it takes some practice.

Then you learn how to stay centered when you're doing other tasks, other chores, and when you're talking to people. You build up gradually. You talk to people who are easy to get along with; you stay centered okay. Then, of course, you have to deal with people who are not easy to get along with. Can you stay centered there?

This is where the sense of full-body awareness is really useful. Think of the breathing as a whole-body process. You inhabit your whole body so that nobody else's energy can come in and take over your space. It's like a magnetic field that protects you from all the negative energies out there.

You begin to see that, as you use the meditation this way, it's a really valuable skill. At the same time—as you're trying to master this skill in being centered, having a sense of well-being—a lot of things come up with which you normally would just flow along. It's like a person floating down a river. You tend to go wherever the current takes you. But now you've got something to hold on to so that when the river is flowing nice and lazily, you stay in place. Even when it flows

strongly, you stay in place. Even when it floods, you stay in place. You've got something to hold on to. The Buddha calls this having an island.

As you're holding on here, you begin to see the various things that would normally pull you away. You say, "Oh my gosh, I've got that attachment and this attachment." As you're watching, you can see clearly that if you try to hold on to these things, you're going to suffer. You can feel the tension in the breath, and you ask yourself, "Why would I want to hold on to those things?"

So as you stay here, watch. You begin to see. You hold on because you can have fun with these things. You enjoy them even though you ordinarily might not admit it to yourself. There are a lot of things that we think about and we tell ourselves, "This is just horrible; I hate this." But we keep feeding on them over and over and over again. We must be getting some satisfaction, some gratification out of those thoughts. Well, look into it.

This is where the meditation, as a foundation, helps you gain insight because you have this center to hold on to—the sense of the breath, the sense of the body right here in the present moment—so that when these other currents come flowing along, you don't have to go with them. And because you have something solid here in the present moment to hold on to, you can actually see these movements. Otherwise, you might miss them.

It's like going out in the middle of a field and looking up at the sky. If there are no trees around, nothing at all to take as a solid point of reference, you look up in the sky, you see the clouds, and you wonder, "Are those clouds moving, or are they not moving? Or is it just my imagination?" But if there's a tree or a telephone pole or the peak of a roof, you can focus on that. You begin to notice: Okay, the clouds are moving north, the clouds are moving south, they're moving this fast. You've got a point of comparison.

So this stage of the effort is learning how to develop what you've got—to develop the good qualities in the mind. And you gain an understanding into how things arise and how they pass away as you master the process of getting the mind to settle down.

This is a process of experimentation. We tend to want to rush through it really quickly, but it's going to take time. It's not a matter of just gaining one insight that will take care of everything. You gain an insight into this particular unskillful quality of the mind. Then you gain an insight into that one, or this attachment, that attachment. Gradually, you begin to see patterns: why the mind holds on to things, where it feels that it's gaining some advantage out of holding on. And when you begin to see it's not really gaining that advantage at all, and the holding

on is just causing a lot of unnecessary stress and suffering, that's when you can let go. At the same time, your concentration grows stronger.

Now, this doesn't all happen in a nice smooth, upward curve. There are going to be ups and downs. An important part of the practice is learning how to learn from the downs, so that each time you sit and meditate, whether it goes well or doesn't go well, you've got an opportunity to learn. That way, in spite of the ups and downs, the general curve is upward. There's greater clarity in the mind, greater understanding. Your powers of mindfulness, alertness, concentration, and discernment: They all grow.

Ultimately, this brings the mind to a point—what we might call the third level of skillful effort—where there's really nothing more to do. If skillful qualities are developed, there's a great sense of balance in the mind—stability. There's a strong sense of well-being. This is not the ultimate happiness. But still, it's stable enough to give you a sense of feeling at home here, like you really belong. And your sensitivity toward the various ways that the mind creates suffering grows more and more refined, more and more refined, until the process of development is complete. That's when you have to let go—and this is total letting go.

The Buddha talks about this particular stage in paradoxes. He says you're not standing still, but you're not moving forward, and you're not drifting backwards. Think of the image of crossing a river: You're not swimming across the river. At the same time, you're not treading water, and you're not sinking. So you say, "Well, what is that?" It's a point of extreme balance, extreme sensitivity.

When you let go at that point, you can totally let go, and you don't just fall back to your old ways or unskillful habits. Everything opens up to something that's really special. It's beyond time and beyond space—totally unconditioned. They talk about that as touching the deathless with the body or seeing it with the body. In other words, it's a total experience—not just an idea. We all like the notion that we could just let go from the beginning, there would be nothing we have to do, and there would be nothing but happiness. We get impatient: We'd like to have that early on in the practice. But it doesn't work that way.

You have to develop skillful qualities so that they're strong, solid, and you really can depend on them. And it's only through the process of developing that you really learn, that you gain the insight. Because it's in gaining the insight into how cause and effect happen in the mind that you get more and more sensitive to the various levels of stress and suffering, the various intentions you have that you might have missed otherwise. They would have just gone on underground. But as you keep working on keeping the mind centered, still, well-established here in the present with a sense of well-being with the breath, well-being in the present

moment, your increased sensitivity allows you to let go of things you would never even imagine were there to begin with. That's what allows the final letting go to be complete.

The image the Buddha gives is of the continental shelf off India with its gradual slope and then a sudden drop. The gradual slope is the effort of giving rise to skillful qualities, learning how to develop them. The gentleness of the slope means that as you develop them, you gradually gain more and more insight, more and more mastery of how to keep the mind glad when it otherwise might get depressed, how to keep it steady when it otherwise might just go wandering off, and how to let go of the things that oppress it—the various thoughts and attachments you have that keep you weighed down. In the course of doing that, the sensitivity ultimately allows there to be that point of no effort, no intention—where the letting go really does open you up to something special.

What this means is that however much you might want to have that last stage happen tonight—or you might say, “Well, I'll be reasonable—just in this weekend”—it doesn't work that way. The sensitivity is something that develops through your consistent practice. So it's a matter of learning to have the patience to stick with it, stick with it. Keep focused on the path. If you stay focused on the path, the goal will come because the path leads you there.

This means that you give your full attention to what you're doing right here, right now, because everything that you need to know is happening right here, right now. And the goal, when it comes, will open up right here, right now, and take you beyond right here, right now. But the entrance to that spot is found right here, right now. So everything you want to do should be focused right here. However long it's going to take doesn't really matter—just that you stick with the practice.

Whether it's simply a matter of learning how to give rise to skillful qualities or of developing them, it's all good work. So try to do it with a sense of joy in the work—because this is good work, not harming anybody at all—and with a sense of respect, a sense of when to give it your full attention, because it does repay your attention with important results.