

Off to a Good Start

August 23, 2010

When you meditate, you want to get your body in place and your mind in place. And actually, in both cases getting in place is simple. It's staying in place that's going to be a little harder.

To get the body in place, you sit straight, hands in your lap, face straight ahead, and close your eyes.

To get the mind in place, you start with thoughts like we had just now, realizing that if you look for any happiness outside there in the world, the world is swept away, it does not endure, offers no shelter. Which means that you have to look inside—not only to find a safe place but also with the realization that the world you create starts inside.

It's from your intentions that you act and speak and think. These actions then have an impact on the world. They create the world that you experience.

When you really think about it, the world you want is one where you can find a dependable happiness. So you want to have goodwill for yourself, and it has to carry over into goodwill to others as well, because if your happiness depends on their misery, it's not going to last.

So you want to get to know your own mind. Two of the qualities you really need in order to get to know it are mindfulness and alertness. We all have these qualities to some extent, it's just a matter of learning how to develop them. Mindfulness is the ability to keep something in mind. Alertness is the ability to know what's actually going on.

So we use the breath as an object to train the mind in these qualities so that they get stronger, more consistent. The problem with our untrained mindfulness is that it can have huge gaps and lapses. We make up our minds to do one thing or to understand something or to hold something in mind, and a few minutes later we're off someplace else.

As for alertness, there's this strange tendency in the mind where we don't really like to watch ourselves. It's very easy to go thinking about other things, paying attention to other things and not really being alert to what we're doing.

So, to counteract that tendency, we focus on the breath because it's very close to the mind. Sometimes an intention will go through the mind and you may not even know that it's there. But if you're sensitive to the breath, you'll notice something's wrong, something's happened.

So we focus on the breath as a way of training mindfulness, training alertness

to give rise to concentration, discernment—and a lot of other good qualities as well. But it's the mindfulness and the alertness that really get trained as our foundation.

So you keep the breath in mind: all the way in, all the way out. You can focus on any part of the body where you can sense the breath. Keep your awareness right there.

Then you notice how comfortable the breath is. Does it feel good? Are you pulling it in too long or squeezing it out too long? Or is it so short that you're not getting any real sense of deep nourishment from it?

Experiment. Try longer breathing, shorter breathing, faster, slower. Give each type of breath a period where you can watch it and see what impact it has on the body, what impact it has on the mind.

That's how you develop your alertness.

Otherwise, if the breathing gets mechanical, you'll start wandering off and thinking about other things. It's like putting the car in automatic pilot. You let it run itself and you start thinking about other things.

So here you don't want your breath to be on automatic pilot. You want to be really clearly aware what the breath is doing as it comes in, what it's doing as it goes out.

Then you want to be alert to the mind as well. Is the mind staying with the breath or is it beginning to cast around for other things to do, other things to think about? If you catch it wandering off, bring it right back. If it wanders off again, bring it right back again.

As for the thought, you don't have to do anything with the thought that's wandered off. You don't have to tie up any loose ends. Just let it go, however ragged it may be. Just keep coming back to the breath, coming back to the breath. It's always here to come back to.

Each time you come back, reward yourself with one really good breath that feels really nourishing deep down inside.

You may notice that certain parts of the body are especially sensitive to how the breathing has an impact. Sometimes it's in the chest, sometimes right in front of the stomach, in your core. Notice how the breathing feels and nourishes that sense of the core of your body. Or it might be right in the middle of the head in the area just above the eyes. Whichever part of the body seems most sensitive to the energy flow, focus there.

Try to maintain a rhythm of breathing that feels really good right there so that it feels good all the way through the in-breath and all the way through the out-. You're not squeezing things out; you're not forcing things in.

When you can focus on the breath in this way, now the mind is in place, too. The hard part is to keep the body in place and to keep the mind in place.

With the body, there's usually going to be an issue around pains. There are different ways you can deal with the pains. One of the best is to not focus on them directly. Stay in whichever parts of the body are comfortable and allow the pains to be in the other parts.

When you sit and read a book or sit and watch a movie and your leg goes to sleep and there's a pain there, it doesn't really bother you because it's not impinging on your awareness. You're aware of other things and find them more interesting.

So try to develop that same kind of interest in the breath. Once you can maintain it, then think of the comfortable sensations as you breathe permeating out through the body, going through the pain. If, say, the pain is in your hips think of the breath going down the back, through the hips, and out the legs.

Be especially sensitive to your posture. Are there any blockages or tightness in the back? That'll often have an impact down in the hips and down in the legs.

So keep your primary focus on the spot that's comfortable and then let that sense of ease and comfort spread down through wherever the pain may develop.

If the pain gets really bad and you can't avoid focusing on it, tell yourself, "Okay, I'll sit with this for five minutes. Then I'll change positions." The five minutes is so that you can be mindful and alert, and not give in to your pains all the time.

You also realize that the pain is not killing you. We haven't had anybody die here during the meditation sessions. And the voice in the mind that's saying, "I can't stand this, I can't stand this," is actually worse than the pain. So don't pay it any attention.

You begin to realize as you meditate that these thoughts that come into the mind that tend to take over, that you tend to go with regardless of whether they're good or bad: You don't really have to go with them. You don't have to believe them.

Think of the mind as a committee. There are lots of different voices in the committee: Some members are invited; other members are not invited. But just because someone is loud doesn't mean they have to take over the committee—or that whoever's speaking at the moment expresses the will of the committee. It's just one voice.

What you're trying to do right now is strengthen the voice that says, "I need to train the mind. I need to develop alertness. I need to develop mindfulness. I want to stay with the breath." Train that voice so that it's strong, so that it doesn't give in

easily to other pressures.

As for keeping the mind in position, try to be as sensitive as possible to how the breathing feels. This is important. If you get lazy in observing it, after a while there's nothing here to capture your attention, to capture your imagination, and the mind's going to go wandering off.

So remind yourself as you're with the breathing that there's a lot to the breath, lots of different levels of breath energy in the body. The way you breathe can have a huge impact both on the body and the mind. Here's your opportunity to study that.

Think of the breath coming in and out through the forehead, or coming in and out through the back of the neck. Just hold that picture in mind and see what happens. Think of the breath coming in right in the middle of the chest, in the abdomen. Think of the breath coming in and out through every pore of your skin. See what that does.

There's a lot to experiment with. The more you develop a sense of interest in the breath, the easier it is to stay with it. And you learn lots of things about the breath that you don't really notice. It comes in and goes out, and after a while you take it for granted without realizing that the way you breathe can have a huge impact on your health—both the health of the body and the health of the mind.

So here's your opportunity to study that. Usually, other things impinge on your awareness. You've got other responsibilities or there are just lots of people demanding your attention. But here you've got the opportunity: a whole hour to study this area of your awareness, this sense of energy right where the mind and the body meet.

So with these thoughts in mind, you want to learn, now that you're in place, how to stay there. See how long you can stay there. If you find yourself wandering off, just start at the beginning again. Because it's in the staying that the mindfulness develops, the alertness develops. And you begin to see a lot of things that you didn't see before.

It's like that old instruction in yoga. They tell you to sit in front of a window and, with your gaze, just go right along the line of the bottom edge of the window to see how evenly you can move your gaze. You'll be surprised to find how much your eyes jump. So you go back and practice so that you can move your gaze steadily, smoothly. As you move it steadily, you start noticing things in the muscles around your eyes, you start noticing things in the window pane, the edge of the window itself that you never saw before.

It's in trying to stay steadily here that you see things that used to fall into the gaps.

So see what you learn as you stay in place here. Because it's not just a matter of tying things down. When you focus here, you learn a lot that you otherwise would miss: things that teach you about the mind, teach you about how the mind creates a lot of unnecessary stress for itself and how you can learn how to stop those things, develop new habits in their place.

Just that much is not awakening but it's a good start in the right direction.