

Breath Meditation, Step by Step

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Get your body into position: right leg on the left leg, hands in your lap, right hand on top of the left hand, your back straight, your eyes closed. Then get your mind into position as well: That's the harder part, but it's the essence of the meditation.

Start out with thoughts of goodwill, first for yourself, to remind yourself of why you're here: It's for true happiness. You can express that wish in your heart, "May I be truly happy." And you realize that it's not a selfish desire, because true happiness is something that comes from within. It doesn't take anything away from anyone else. It's not the case that when you have true happiness, you have to deprive other people of their happiness. Actually, it's a gift for yourself and for the other people around you as well. It's like having a candle: Once your candle is lit, it provides brightness not only for you but also for the people around you as well.

So the next thought is to think of the happiness of those around you. People first who are close to your heart: May they find true happiness too.

Then spread those thoughts out into ever widening circles: to people you know well and like, to people you're more neutral about, to people you don't like—that's sometimes the hard part of spreading goodwill.

But you realize that if you have limitations on your goodwill, it places a limitation on your own mind. So no matter how much other people have wronged you, you don't wish for anything evil to happen to them. You just hope that maybe they can find true happiness someday, and that way they'll stop wronging people.

Then spread thoughts of goodwill to people you don't even know, and not just people: living beings of all kinds—east, west, north, south, above, and below, out to infinity. May they all find true happiness.

The reason we spread thoughts of goodwill is to provide a comfortable place for the mind, comfortable thoughts for the mind.

The next step in bringing the mind into position is to make it comfortable with the body, because that's what you've got sitting here right now. And it's a long tradition in the Buddha's teachings that the mind can't find happiness, can't gain release from the issues of body and mind, until you really understand the body and mind. So you've got to stay with them for long periods of time.

The point where they meet is at the breath, so bring your attention to the breath. When it comes in, know it's coming in. When it goes out, know that it's going out. Keep reminding yourself to stay there with the breath.

It doesn't do any good to be with the breath for a few minutes and then wander off other places for a half an hour, and then come back for a minute or two and then wander off again.

The kind of knowledge you want for the sake of freedom is long continuous knowledge—that sees causes and effects.

If you breathe in a certain way, how does it affect the mind? When you breathe in another way, how does it affect the mind? How does it affect the body?

When you focus on the breath in a certain way, what does that do to the breath? How does the mind affect the body? How does the body affect the mind? Or to be more precise: What events in the mind affect events in the body? And what other events in the body have an effect on events in the mind?

To see this, you have to be with the body and mind continually, for long periods of time. Otherwise, your knowledge is like connect-the-dots: You have a dot here and a dot there and you have to guess where the lines are between the two dots. And what is that guesswork based on, other than ignorance? What you want is to see the lines. Stay with the body and mind, with the breath long enough that the lines become perfectly clear—so there's no guesswork involved.

Now, to stay with the breath, you have to make it comfortable. You can experiment with different rhythms of breathing: You can breathe in long and out long. Think of yourself as ventilating both the body and the mind.

And then, if long breathing feels uncomfortable, you can change it. You can make it shorter. You make the breath deeper or more shallow, heavier or lighter—whatever rhythm or texture of breath feels good for the body right now.

You might also have a sense of what the body needs right now: When it's tired, it needs a rhythm of breathing that'll give it more energy. When it's tense or irritable, you need a way of breathing that relaxes you, that's soothing.

So try to get a sense of what's *just right* for body and mind right now. And stick with the breath as your guide, and as the basis of the skill that you're developing here.

The first level of skill in the meditation is just to stay with the breath as long as you can. This requires mindfulness, alertness, and a quality the Buddha called *ardency*. In other words, you're really intent on what you're doing. If there's no intentness, then mindfulness comes for a little while and then goes away—you get relaxed a little bit and you just drift off, which is not what you want. You're putting the mind into position and trying to keep it there.

The Buddha once compared himself to a surgeon. And the kind of surgery he's doing is surgery on the mind, which is the most precise kind of surgery there is. You might make a comparison with when they do laser surgery on your eyes. Your head has to be in precisely the right position for the laser to cut at the right spot. And it's the same way with the Buddha's teachings: For the Dhamma to really cut through your attachments, your mind has to be in the right position.

So be mindful to stay with the breath, which means you have to keep reminding yourself to be here. And then be alert: Watch how the breath really feels. Try to be as sensitive as you can, and as honest as possible about what feels good and what doesn't feel good.

This quality of honesty is very important in the practice. The Buddha once said the main prerequisite he had for taking on a student was that the student be honest. *Give me an honest person*, he said, *someone who's no deceiver*. That means someone who doesn't deceive other people, at the same time not deceiving him or herself. Then, the Buddha said, *I'll teach that person the Dhamma*.

It's not just that the Buddha is the surgeon—you have to develop your own talents at surgery as well. The Buddha can't come down and give you awakening. You have to take his Dhamma and apply it to your own mind.

You have to develop your skills. And alertness is one of the main skills that helps cut through any deceptions in the mind, any ways the mind keeps things from itself, or hides things from itself—or has a tendency *not* to pay attention to the details. Alertness is what keeps the meditation honest, what keeps it on track.

Finally, there's the quality of ardency. When the mind is with the breath, you try to be really sensitive to the way the breath feels. Don't let anything escape your attention if it's related to the breath.

Ardency also means that when you find that you've slipped off the breath, you bring it right back. You don't go peeking into other issues that present themselves. As you sit here, all kinds of other thoughts are going to come up—because that's the way the mind has been for a long time. This thought comes and you peek into it, "Where will this thought take me?" Then another thought comes, and you peek into that. But it's not just sitting there for you to peek into. Once you get into it, it takes you off other places: off to the past, off to the future. Away from the breath, away from the present. Out of position.

So you have to learn how to overcome that habit. Thoughts will present themselves, and it's the habitual nature of the mind to go with them, because you've got past kamma that keeps having this effect on the mind—your old habit of trying to find happiness by getting into these thoughts. Now you're going to change that habit.

As soon as you realize you're off the breath, you bring the mind right back. No waiting around. Then try to pay extra careful attention to the breathing. Why did you slip off just now? What was wrong with the breath? What was wrong with the mind?

Rather than tracing back the causes in the past, just look into the breath and the mind in the present. Where are they not in alignment? Then do what you can to bring them back into alignment.

Once you've got these three qualities—mindfulness, alertness, and ardency—you've got the basis for the skill you're developing. That way, you become your own surgeon. You can

take the Dhamma, which is often compared to a knife, so you can cut away your attachments, the attachments that keep the mind tied down.

We're here for the sake of liberation, for the sake of freedom, and no matter how much other people may be keeping us oppressed or tied down outside, finally, the real liberation is liberation from our own entanglements, our own attachments.

So get the mind into precise position, and let it stay there for a long time so that you can really see what's going on. Then you can apply that knife with skill and precision, right where it really needs to make the cut.

Some people complain that they've read the Dhamma for years and years, and still can't seem to cut through their attachments. That's because they've got the knife, but their mind isn't in position. So it just cuts here, and cuts there, but it's not right in the right spot.

You've got to get the mind in position, right here at the present—alert, mindful, and ardent. So as soon as you can see where there's unnecessary suffering and the craving that goes along with that suffering, you can cut right through the craving, cut right through the ignorance.

And then you'll see that the Buddha's surgery really does make a big difference in the mind. Because when you cut at the right spot, it cuts those things away for good. Whatever attachments were causing suffering, whatever ignorance was causing the diseases of the mind—greed, anger, and delusion: That ignorance can be gone for good.

That's the good news of the Buddha's teaching. Even though there are things in the world that change and are impermanent, the effect that the Dhamma can have on the mind when it's used with precision is once and for all. The suffering can be gone for once and for all.

So do your best to master this skill. Do your best to get the mind in position so that you can apply that skill with precision. When the Buddha talks about knowing for yourself, this is how he recommends you go about it.

It's not just a matter of sitting around and deciding that you like or dislike a particular teaching. It's seeing *where* it's properly applied. That's when you really come to appreciate the power of the Dhamma.