

Starting from Within

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Meditation focuses inside, because this is where troubles begin. But it's also where the solution can be found.

We tend to focus outside, thinking that troubles come from outside or the potential help for our troubles is going to come from outside. And to some extent that's true. But the deeper causes, both for the trouble and for the help, ultimately come from within. So this is where we focus.

Right here at the breath is where the body and the mind meet. Your most direct experience of the body is actually breath sensations, the feeling of energy that flows throughout the whole body. So if you want to understand what you've got inside yourself here, both inside the body and the mind, the breath is a good place to start. Be aware of it as it comes in, aware of it as it goes out. And be on friendly terms with it, allow it to come in and out in whatever way feels really good.

To find what way feels really good, you can experiment. Longer breathing, shorter breathing, faster, slower: There are lots of ways you can play with the breath, until you get a good idea of what the range of possibilities is right now, exactly how good can it feel breathing in, breathing out.

And again, think of the breath as prior to everything else that you feel in the body. In other words, there may be parts of the body that feel constricted or painful, but just think of the breath going right through them. It doesn't have to be constricted by them. The breath doesn't have to shrink away from those spots. Give it priority.

You find that as you get on better and better terms with the breath, you also get on better and better terms with the present moment, more sensitive to what's going on—and in particular, more sensitive to what's going on inside the body, what's going on inside the mind, and how those events are connected, because they're going to have to pass through the breath.

As you focus here, you begin to see areas in which you cause yourself unnecessary stress, unnecessary suffering, create a lot of unnecessary disturbance inside. When you do that, you just weigh yourself down. So when you learn to see it and learn how to recognize it for what it is and realize that you don't have to do it, then you lift a burden off yourself.

This is the basic pattern of the whole practice, simply that your sensitivity to the stress gets more refined, and also your ability to sense exactly what it is that you're doing that's causing the stress: That gets more refined as well. At the same time, your sense of the possibilities of how you can relate to the present moment gets more expansive. You become less and less a prisoner of your old ways of doing things. Learn how to take more advantage of this

opportunity you have in the present moment to act in a way that doesn't cause suffering, to act in a way that's skillful.

Now this is a gift, not only to yourself but also to the people around you. When you're not burdened down, you can help other people shoulder their loads. If you're all burdened down, you don't have any extra strength left at all. You're tottering along with a huge bundle over your shoulders, and someone comes up with another little bundle and says, "Can we add this to your bundle?" and of course, you say, "No, no," or if you do say Yes, finally you come crashing down because the burdens you're already carrying are so heavy.

This is one of the Buddha's major insights: that the burdens we create for ourselves are the really heavy burdens we carry in life. When you learn to put those burdens down, you find that the burdens of other people don't weigh much at all.

This is why people who've taken care of the issues of their own minds have more room for compassion for other people. When they see an injustice, they don't have to get angry before they work on it. For most people, they're so tied up with their own sufferings that the only way that they can get worked up enough to help other people who are suffering or being treated unfairly is if they get really angry and have a lot of ill will for the perpetrators. But that kind of energy burns itself out pretty quickly—and burns you out quickly as well. But if you're not burdened down, you see an injustice someplace else and you don't have to get angry in order to work on it. You see that this is something that needs to be done, you see that you also have the ability to help, and it doesn't require all that much extra effort. So you don't need to be angry in order to be helpful. In fact, your help tends to be more precise, tends to be more to the point because it's not clouded by anger.

This is one of the reasons why meditation is not a selfish activity. You create less suffering inside, you find that you lean less heavily on other people, and you also have more resilience, so that, at times, you can allow other people to lean on you. This is one of those rare things in the world where in looking after your own well-being, you're also looking after the well-being of others.

There's that famous passage in the suttas, of an acrobat standing on the end of a bamboo pole. He asks his assistant to get up on his shoulders, he says, "Okay, now I'll look out after you, and you'll look out after me, and that way we'll be able to perform our tricks safely and then come down from the pole." And his assistant says, "No." She says, "No, you look out after yourself, I'll look out after myself and that way we'll protect each other and we'll be able to come down from the pole safely."

In other words, you can't help another person maintain his or her balance. However, if you maintain *your* balance, you're not making it harder for the other person to maintain his or her balance. That's how we protect one another.

So look at this time as you're working on your breath—working on getting acquainted with the issues inside and also more and more skillful at dealing with the issues inside—as a gift

to yourself and as a gift to the people around you. It's one of those activities that's really worth pursuing no matter how hard it seems.

Because if *you* don't do it, who's going to do it for you? And if you don't do it *now*, when are you going to do it? So you're dealing with important issues and you've got the guidance of someone who's dealt with his issues: You've got the Buddha's teachings, you've got the teachings of all the noble disciples. They've dealt with their issues and they all show with their lives that it can be done—and that it's well worth doing.

So even though the circumstances for practice here might not be one hundred percent ideal, still they're good enough. So take advantage of them.