

A Safe Home

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Once you've got the body in place to meditate, the real work lies in getting the mind in place. Actually, the getting in place is not that hard. You just focus on the breath. Know when the breath is coming in; know when it's going out. If you're going to think, think about the breath. It's okay to think in the meditation, as long as the thinking deals with the breath, deals with your object. After all, you've got to evaluate it, because that's what makes it easier to do the long work, which is not only getting the mind in place but also keeping it in place.

The nature of the mind is to keep wandering off. It's like a small child that's attracted by anything at all: bright lights, pretty colors, pretty sounds. It goes right there, and sometimes that's dangerous. This is how children get kidnapped. This is how they get run over in the street. They're attracted by something and just go running after it, without looking right or left, or looking at who's giving them the candy. They just go for whatever is attractive, whatever captures their attention.

To keep this child at home, you've got to give it toys to play with, so play with the breath. You can try long breathing, short breathing, deep breathing, shallow breathing, heavy or light breathing, fast or slow. Think of the breath as a whole-body process. In other words, you don't focus simply on the sensation of the breath coming in and out of the nose, but on any part of the body where there's any sense of movement, any sense of energy flow. You can focus on that and adjust the rhythm and texture of the breath, so that it feels really good right there. It feels very gratifying to breathe in, gratifying to breathe out.

In this way, as the child of the mind has good things to play with, it's not going to go wandering off so easily. It can get absorbed right here. And this way, it stays at home. When it stays at home, it's safe.

We're giving the mind a good secure place to stay because it needs it. There are dangers around: not only dangers coming from outside, but also dangers coming up from within the mind itself. Greed, anger and delusion: Those are the big ones. Sometimes we seem to think that greed is sparked by something outside, or anger is sparked by something outside, but there are often times when the mind is simply in the mood to be greedy and then it goes looking for something worthy of its greed. Sometimes it wants to be angry and so it goes out looking for something worthy of its anger.

So the mind needs protection from those things. And part of its protection is having a good comfortable place to stay right here, so that when these things come

bubbling up out of the mind, you can see them clearly for what they are. You can see the anger arise, you can see where it's going, you can foresee what's going to happen if you follow it. If you realize you've got a better place to stay right now, then it's a lot easier to resist the anger.

You simply don't have to follow through with it. Just breathe right through the physical symptoms that go along with the anger, and you'll find that it loses a lot of its power. In other words, you're occupying more of the body. You're more at home in the body. You're not giving it over to these alien forces that can cause you harm.

The Buddha talks about developing mindfulness immersed in the body, and the image is of the body totally saturated with your mindfulness, from the head to the toe. When mindfulness occupies the body this way, then other things that would come in and create disturbances have a harder time getting in. This means that you're more protected. You're safer. You're less likely to do things under the power of greed or anger, things that you later regret. The purpose of the meditation is not only to give you a comfortable place to stay in the present—although that is one of the purposes—but it's also put you in a good solid position so that when unskillful thoughts come up in the mind, you're less likely to go for them, because you've got something better, a better place to stay. You're in a position of strength, less likely to get knocked over.

And you're developing two important qualities to protect the mind: mindfulness and alertness. Mindfulness means keeping things in mind. In other words, you can remember that if you act on anger, it's going to cause problems. If you act on greed, it's going to cause problems. If you act on lust or delusion, it's going to cause problems. You've got to keep that in mind. All too often, we like to forget it. Anger comes along, and we very conveniently forget the last time we gave in to the anger, what we said and did, and how much we regretted it later. The mind puts up a wall because it wants to act on the anger again. But when your mindfulness is really solid and continuous, it's harder to put up that wall. And when you learn to associate a sense of ease and well-being with the mindfulness, then it's a lot easier to keep thoughts of anger from coming up.

The reason we go for things like anger, greed, lust, and whatever, is the immediate sense of gratification they provide. As the Buddha once said, you can't really abandon unskillful thoughts until you see both the gratification that comes from them and the drawbacks. Once you admit, say, that there is a gratification from acting on anger, then you can look at it, and compare it to the sense of the ease and well-being that comes from being mindful and alert. As your powers of

observation get more and more refined, you begin to see there's really no comparison.

So mindfulness is what keeps reminding you of the lessons you've learned from your past actions. Alertness is what keeps watch for what's actually happening right now, so that you see the processes of the mind as they happen. You can see the point where the mind abandons responsibility and just goes with unskillful thoughts. You also see the connection between acting on an unskillful motivation and the suffering that comes as a result of the action. When you've got mindfulness and alertness working together, your choices and decisions get better and better informed. As you learn to associate them with a sense of ease and well-being, they get stronger within the mind.

So as we're working with the breath, these are the qualities we're trying to develop. Keep the breath in mind—that's mindfulness—and then watch the breath, be sensitive to the breath, to how it feels in the different parts of the body: That's alertness. Once you've got a sense of these two qualities going with the breath, then you can try exploring how the breath feels in different parts the body. Make a survey. Start at the navel, go up the front of the body, section by section, then go over the head, through the head, down the back, out the legs. Start again at the back of the neck, go down through the shoulders and out the arms to the tips of fingers.

In other words, work through the body section by section to see what rhythm of breathing really feels best for that part of the body. If there's any sense of tension or tightness, you can allow it to relax. Then move on to the next section and then the next. Keep this up until you're ready to settle down. Then choose any one spot in the body that seems most congenial, focus your awareness there, and think of your awareness spreading out from that spot to fill the whole body.

This way, you strengthen your powers of mindfulness, you strengthen your powers of alertness, and give yourself a good solid place to stay, so that you don't get knocked over by greed, anger, or delusion, so they don't lure you out in front of a car or lure you out to be kidnapped. You're creating a home for the mind, and it's a good home, a safe home, a home where you don't feel confined, a home where you're happy to stay.

The good part about this home is that you can take it wherever you go. After all, the breath is always there, simply that it's up to you to focus on it or not. When you learn to associate the breath with a sense of ease and well-being, a sense of fullness, you can even get a sense of rapture, simply being with the breath and allowing it to feel full as it comes in, and maintain that fullness even as the breath

goes out. In other words, don't squeeze it out too much. Try to maintain a fullness of the breath energy throughout the body.

That way, the idea of acting on skillful intentions becomes more attractive, because an immediate sense of well-being comes with it. All too often, the choice in our mind is immediate gratification through acting on unskillful thoughts, or delayed gratification working on skillful ones. And if that's the only choice, the skillful ones most often lose out. If the mind is hungry, if it wants something right away, it's going to go for whatever offers the quickest fix. But if you can learn to associate mindfulness, alertness, concentration, all these good qualities with a sense of fullness and ease in the body, then the skillful side gets the upper hand, because it offers not only immediate pleasure of a more refined time, but also a long-lasting pressure.

That way, the desire to always do the most skillful thing gets more and more established, more solid. When it's established and solid, you have your protection. Your home is a home built out of brick, not out of straw or sticks. The wolf comes and can't blow it down.

So you've got a whole hour to work on this home. Make it comfortable. Stick with it as much as you can, because it provides a sense of protection. It develops powers of alertness and mindfulness that can last well beyond the hour.