

How to Straighten Out the World

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Get your body in position. Sit with your back straight, your hands in your lap. Face forward, close your eyes.

Then get your mind in position. Be aware of the breath, because the breath is one of the best anchors to keep you in the present moment. There's no future breath you can watch, there's no past breath you can watch. If you're with the breath, you know you're in the present. So keep the breath in mind: That's mindfulness. Then watch the breath as it's coming in, as it's going out: That's alertness.

You also need alertness to make sure that your mind is staying with the breath. If you realize that you've slipped off, just bring it right back. The breath is always here. It's not going to go anywhere. It's the mind that's going places. Actually, the mind doesn't really go any place, it stays right here as well, but it creates little worlds for itself here inside and then it gets into the worlds and loses its bearings. So as soon as you find yourself in a little world like that, just come back to this world: the world of the body here in the present moment, breathing in, breathing out.

Let the breath be comfortable. You don't have to force it, you don't have to squeeze it, you don't have to make it do anything that doesn't feel right for the body. Just think: "The whole body can breathe in. Whichever parts of the body want to be involved in the breathing process, let it happen." Think of the breath not so much as air coming in and out of the lungs, but as the energy flow in the body.

So relax your hands, relax your feet. Notice any spots of tension in the body and allow them to relax. You can start at the top of the head and just go down through your face, through your neck, down the torso; down your arms to the fingers; then down your back to the hips, down to the legs, down to the toes. Or you can start with the toes and come back up, either way. Just go through the whole body, looking for any patterns of tension. If you have trouble figuring out whether there's tension or not, compare the right side to the left side of the body. If you notice tension on one side and not on the other, relax whatever tension you see. Just go down through the body that way, go through it several times, so that it feels good to be here in the present moment.

And allow the breath to do its thing. You might experiment a little bit with it to see: Does shorter breathing feel good? Does longer breathing feel good? Just think *longer* and the breath will grow longer. Then you can notice if it feels right. If it does, maintain that rhythm. If not, you can change. You can think *deep, shallow, heavy, light, or heavier, lighter*, until you find a rhythm that feels right, until you find a texture of breathing that feels right. Allow it to maintain that rhythm, maintain that texture, until it doesn't feel right anymore, then you can

change again. In other words, try to keep tabs on the changes in the body. Even though you're sitting still, there will be changes. So watch for them, and then adjust the breathing as seems appropriate.

That's getting the mind in position.

The more comfortable the breath is, the more satisfying it feels just to sit here breathing, then the easier and easier it is to keep it in position. Because the getting in position is not all that hard, it's the keeping that takes some effort. You can't simply say to the mind, "Okay, sit," and expect it to stay here for the whole hour. You have to tend to it; you have to look after it. This requires practice. It takes time. So if you find that in the beginning it's not working, that doesn't matter. Notice what does work and then, over time, each time you meditate, you'll learn a little bit more, a little bit more about how to keep the mind here.

In this way, you begin to develop not only stillness of mind but also some understanding about the ways of the mind. This is how, as the Buddha said, good solid concentration requires both calm and insight. The insight here is understanding the ways of the mind, at least enough to get it to settle down and then to maintain it in that position. It's not the case that you do tranquility meditation and then drop it and move on to insight meditation. You try to get the mind still so that you can see its movements, but you need some understanding of its movements to get it to stay still.

Sometimes it's easy to keep it here; other times it's hard. The question of easy or hard has very little to do with things outside, and a lot more to do with ideas, feelings, emotions coming up from within. When the mind is still, you find it easier to deal with those emotions. Sometimes you simply notice something's come up and you say, "I don't want to go there," and you come right back to the breath. Other times, you have to reflect on the drawbacks of that emotion as it comes up. If you were to follow it, if you were to get into it, where would it take you?

We have such a strong tendency to identify with our emotions. We know that the information we get, the thoughts we may have, are things that are not all that certain. We pick up so much from the media, we get so much information from unreliable sources, that we tend not to grab on to it nearly as tightly as we grab on to our feelings. We feel, "These feelings they're me, they're mine." But if you find that holding on to a particular feeling makes you miserable, you've got to question it: "Why hold onto something that makes you miserable? You don't have to." As the Buddha points out, you have the choice. You don't have to take on everything that comes up in the mind. But in order to really get past a lot of those feelings, you have to understand them, you have to watch them as they come, watch them as they go. Figure out why they have such a hold on the mind.

This requires as much concentration and as much mindfulness as you can muster. Ideally, a state of concentration fills the body with a calm awareness. But to get there, first you have to have at least a spot in the body where you're focused and try to maintain that focus through

time. Try to develop a oneness through time. This is the function of mindfulness and alertness. You keep the breath in mind and you keep watching. There may be thoughts in what seem like other parts of the body, other parts of the mind, but for the time being just let them go, to whatever extent you can. Focus instead on keeping things continuous. That's oneness over time.

Then as that oneness over time gets more established, you can start thinking more about oneness in the present, or oneness in space, filling the whole body with a sense of ease, filling the whole body with a sense of stillness. That allow you to catch thoughts and emotions as they come up, just little nibbles before they eat you all up.

That's what's meant by real oneness, the oneness of concentration. It's one over time and oneness in space. You stay with the same object over time and that one object fills your awareness in the present. Think of the breath energy filling the whole body and your awareness filling the whole body. That's what you're working toward.

As you're working in that direction, you begin to see things coming up and you need strategies in dealing with them. Thoughts of remorse, say, from the past; anxiety about the future: These are ones with lots of Velcro. You have to learn how to shave off all those little hooks. That requires both concentration and insight to see why the mind likes to grab on to those things. It's through force of habit, but even force of habit has its reasons. You want to look for them. Why is remorse compelling? Why is anxiety compelling? What assumptions are these things based on?

We tend to think that feelings come first and then thoughts grow out of the feelings, but often the feelings grow out of the thoughts. You have a way of justifying to yourself that you've really got to think about these things.

So first you have to ask yourself, "How realistic, how helpful are those thoughts?" As with remorse: What does remorse do? You don't gain Brownie points from being remorseful. In fact, remorse saps your energy in the present moment, which means you're less likely to do what's skillful in the present moment. So it's really not a helpful emotion at all. If you remember some stupid mistake or some horrible thing you did in the past, just remind yourself, "I don't need to do that again. I don't want to do it again." You can't go back and undo it, but you can resolve in the present moment, "Okay, I won't do it anymore. I've seen how bad it is." That's all you need.

Any weaving of thoughts that go past that, that would turn into remorse, you've got to cut through the weave. You're not compelled to think in that way; you don't accomplish anything, you're not doing anything for anybody thinking in that way. If the mind is still enough, and if you watch carefully enough, then you begin to see the reasons for why that remorse is so compelling.

Part of the mind will be screaming at you, "You've got to think about these things!" and you have to ask, "Why?" "Because." Usually it doesn't go past the "because," so you say, "Okay,

why?” until it begins to explain something. Often the reasons we have these emotions, or the reasons we’re stuck on these emotions, come from ways we used to think way back before we knew how to think properly. And yet they still have power. So you’ve got to question them, try to bring them up into the light of awareness. When you really look at the reasons, you’ll begin to see that they wither away in the light of your awareness.

The same with thoughts of anxiety: If you get anxious about the future, well, exactly what expectations do you have about what you need to do in the future? What are you being called to do? What are the standards against which you’re being judged? How realistic are they?

Or given the fact that the world has aging, illness and death—they’re inevitable, a lot of pain is inevitable—you can’t fend off all the pain that the world has to offer. What you *can* do, though, is work on the suffering that comes from craving and ignorance. That *is* under your power. If you can cut through that, then you’re in a good position. One, you yourself suffer a lot less. And two, when you’re suffering a lot less, you can see where you can really genuinely be of help to other people.

So have a realistic view of the standards against which you have to measure yourself, and the possibilities: What can a person actually do about this world? We’d like to straighten up as much as we can, we’d like to clean up as much as we can. If other people’s suffering were like houses that you could clean, then you could go out and clean up as many houses as you like. But suffering isn’t a thing. It comes from an activity. It comes from each person’s unskillful habits, which means that each person has to clean up his or her own act. You can’t go cleaning up other people’s acts for them. You clean up your act, one, as an example to others, and then two, you see where you *can* be of help because you’re now in a better position. But there are certain areas where you just can’t make a difference. This is why equanimity provides the safety net for those sublime attitudes we chanted just now.

We start out with goodwill for everybody: for ourselves, for all the people around us. When we see that people are suffering, we feel compassion, we want to do what we can to help. When we see people are happy, we don’t resent their happiness, we’re not jealous of them. We’re happy that they’re happy. But there are a lot of areas where you see someone suffering and you can’t help. They have their karma, you have your limitations as well, and you have to accept that. There’s only so much a human being can do.

The important thing, though, is that one of the things you *can* do is start looking into your craving, looking into your ignorance. What craving keeps the anxiety going? What ignorance keeps the anxiety going? As you understand that, you begin to cut through the craving, cut through the ignorance, and that particular cause of suffering ends. The suffering that comes from craving and ignorance is what really gets into the heart and mind.

The pains inherent in the fact that this is a fabricated world, a conditioned world where there’s aging, illness and death: That’s always going to be there. Fortunately, that’s not the suffering that really gets into the heart and mind. The suffering that gets into the heart and

mind is the type you create through your ignorance and craving. You find from the meditation—developing enough concentration, enough insight—that you can cut through those things. That’s something you *can* do.

So focus your energy on what you *can* do and leave aside what you can’t. The Buddha’s definition of a wise person is one who realizes that what lies in your power really are your tasks. You focus on those. You don’t take on jobs, you don’t take on tasks that you really can’t do. They’re really not yours to do.

The world is full of too many people who want to take on the tasks that are really appropriate for other people to do, and they neglect their own. Because they’re doing this out of ignorance, there’s usually greed and aversion involved in their ways of deciding how they want to straighten out the world. They often end up just inflicting other people with their greed, aversion, and delusion. That’s not really helpful.

What’s really helpful to others is that you straighten out the greed, aversion, and delusion in your own mind. This is how you do it: by being mindful and developing powers of concentration that’ll allow both for calm in the mind and for the possibility of developing insight. This is what you want to hold to. This is what you want to work on.

That relates to another distinction the Buddha made between a wise person and a foolish person. The wise person sees the value of training the mind. The foolish person doesn’t. The wise person sees that if you train your mind, you get rid of all the causes that make you suffer, that make you weak, that burden you down.

When you can get rid of them, you’ve taken care of your own problems. Then you can turn and see what you can do for others. Now, it’s not that you help them only when you’ve completed your task. But the more you work on this, the better position you’re in, step by step by step, to be helpful outside.

So try to develop wisdom. Focus on things that really are your task. Focus on training your mind, because that’s really ultimately the best contribution you can make, not only to yourself but to the world around you. It’s a gift, the best gift there is.