

## *Basic Meditation Instructions*

*September 2, 2006*

Get your body in position. Sit with your back straight, hands palm-up on your lap, right hand on top of your left hand. Face forward and close your eyes. That's the body in position.

The next step is to get the mind in position. Think of the chant we had just now on goodwill. Tell yourself in all sincerity: "May I be happy. May I find true happiness. May all beings be happy." What we're looking for is a happiness that doesn't interfere with the happiness of anyone else. It's a true happiness. And that has to come from within. That's why we're meditating, to take the resources we have inside and devote them to the quest for a genuine happiness.

With that thought in mind, focus on your breath. Know when the breath is coming in, know when it's going out. Each time it comes in, each time it goes out. That's called the mind in position.

Getting it there is not difficult. The difficulty lies in keeping it there. The same with the body: Sitting down for a few minutes in the meditation posture, even if you're new to it, is not all that hard. It's keeping it there, staying still: That's what's going to take some effort. Just tell yourself that for the time being you're not going to worry about the body. The body is secondary. Any pains in the leg, pains in the back, just let them be there. Don't put yourself in the line of fire.

In other words, you don't have to identify with them, saying, "This pain is painning me," or "I'm being pained by the pain." Just think to yourself, "There's a sensation there." That's it. Beyond that, you don't have to pay much attention to it. It's not going to kill you. It's not a sign that your legs are going to fall off, simply that the blood circulation is being squeezed off in certain parts of the body, and that's going to force the blood into other parts. That's what the pain is. But eventually those other parts begin to develop new blood vessels. So you're educating the body. The longer you sit in this position, if you do it in moderation every day, after a while the body gets used to sitting in this position. It rewires itself.

So there's nothing you have to worry about in terms of the pain. The big issue is trying to keep the breath comfortable. Keep the mind in position with the breath. The best way to do that is to make the breath interesting. Try playing with the breath. See what long breathing is like for a while. Then try short breathing, deeper breathing, more shallow, heavier, lighter, until you find a rhythm and texture of breath that feels just right. Stick with that.

Once it feels comfortable, then think of that comfortable sensation spreading to different parts of the body. Keep your focus steadily with the breath but keep it open and relaxed. Don't clamp down too hard on the breath. You're not trying to put yourself into a trance. You're not trying to squeeze the mind into position. You're just trying to keep track of the breath. That way, you can allow the blood to flow freely, comfortably, without a lot of restriction, without a lot of tension.

One way to keep the meditation comfortable is to think of relaxing your hands, relaxing your feet. Start with the tips of fingers and go up the fingers, through the hands, up through the wrists, thinking that all those muscles, all those patterns of tension, can just relax. The tension can dissolve away. Then try the same with your feet. Try keeping your feet and your hands relaxed as you focus on the breath. This makes it easier to stay in the present because not only is the breath something you can play with, but there's a sense of ease and well-being that you can develop. We're not trying to imprison the mind here. We're trying to lure it here.

Why? Because all the important decisions in life are being made right here in the present moment. Your life is being shaped by your intentions, and the present moment is where your intentions happen. But all too often, we're not watching. We're off someplace else. As a result, we don't have as much a say in the shaping of our life as we could.

So the more consistently you can stay here, the more you see the subtle movements in the mind, and the more you can direct them in the direction you want them to go—acting on intentions that are skillful, that really will bring about happiness, long-term happiness, not just a flash-in-the-pan happiness.

The Buddha once said the beginning of wisdom is this question: What when I do will lead to my long-term welfare and happiness? That's the basic motivation for what we're doing here. We want something that really is lasting, a happiness that doesn't let us down.

In the course of focusing the mind on the breath like this, you're developing good qualities of the mind that will help in this direction.

The very first one is mindfulness, the ability to keep something in mind. In this case, you're keeping the breath in mind, and at the same time you're keeping in mind the idea that you want the mind to settle down.

Mindfulness is not just being in the present moment and accepting whatever's coming up. It's being in the present moment and recognizing what you're doing that's skillful and what you're doing that's not. Then you want to shape the mind or direct the mind in a skillful direction.

This requires another quality, alertness, which means actually seeing what you're doing while you're doing it. ]

Then there's a third quality, which is translated as ardency. You really stick with this from breath to breath to breath. You give it your full attention and try to do it well. If you see the mind wandering off, you bring it right back. In other words, you keep it on a short leash. If you kept it on a long leash, it would get wound around this tree and that bush, this person's leg, and who knows what else, like a dog on a long leash. If you want to pull it back, you've got to unwind all the things the leash has wound around. That takes time. But if you keep on a short leash, it doesn't get wound around anything at all.

So as soon as you notice the mind has slipped off, bring it right back. When it's back, try to be as sensitive you can to the breath: how it feels coming in, how it feels going out. Use your ingenuity to see what ways of breathing would feel more comfortable, more satisfying. After all, the breath is the energy that keeps you alive. This is the breath of life. It only stands to reason that if the breath of life feels good, it's going to be good for the body, good for the mind.

So try to find which sensations in the breathing process really do feel gratifying, which kind of breath would feel gratifying, and then stick with it. Whenever you find something that feels really good, think of the good sensation seeping out throughout the body. Think of the body as a big sponge, and that the sensations can spread all through body, out to the pores.

That's the basic technique for getting the mind to settle down in the present moment.

In the course of getting it to settle down, you've already learned something about your intentions. If you stick with one intention, it really does work. It really does make a change in how you experience the body, what you notice in the mind. And when the mind is settled down, you can see your intentions even more clearly. If you're really alert, you can notice even the beginning of an intention to wander off before it's actually gone: just a little stirring in the mind, a little sense of, "I've had enough of this, let's try something else." Watch for that. As soon as you sense it, try to make the breath even more gratifying, even more satisfying, to keep the mind absorbed, to keep it happy being here.

Once it's here for good long time, you can't help but notice other random movements in the mind, and how, on the one hand, they are pretty random, but on the other hand, if you get involved with them, they can really shape the way your life goes. Look at the past. There are certain decisions you made, yet you had no idea at the time how momentous they were going to be, and how they would determine where you're working, who you're living with, whatever. And it

was your decision. It wasn't the stars contriving things. But then there's the question of exactly how much conscious input you had in the decisions. Think of all the things you've done in the past that you've regretted. Again, you weren't thinking clearly, you weren't mindful. You weren't alert.

So it's by developing these qualities of mindfulness and alertness that you begin to have a better chance of making the right choices in life, shaping the kind of life you really want. It's like going down to the gym. You go down and you exercise, but you don't leave your muscles in the gym. You carry them around in your body. You can use your newfound strength for other jobs, jobs that are really worthwhile. The same way when you meditate: You're here sitting on the meditation cushion with your eyes closed, but you're not just engaging a little stress relaxation, stress reduction. You're developing mental qualities that you can carry into the rest of your life. You can be more alert to what you're doing. You can be more mindful about what you should be doing, more attentive to cause and effect as they play out in your life.

It's in this way that the mind can really find a happiness that's going to be satisfying. It's in this way that the meditation helps you see what's going on in your mind, strengthens the parts of the mind that really are skillful, really are helpful, to put you more in the driver's seat. All too often our thoughts are in the driver's seat. They drive up and say, "Hop in," and we hop in. Then we ask, "Where are you going? Where are you taking me?" By that time, it's too late. You're in the car, they can take you out anywhere they want down some back alley, rob you, shoot you, push you out the back door, and drive off.

You want to be in the driver seat, so that when the time comes to think about things, you can direct your thoughts in the direction that's going to be useful. When you realize you've thought something through, then you can rest the mind, so that it's not wasting its energy in idle inner chatter. And when its energy isn't wasted, then when something else comes along that you really need to think about, you've already got the mind well rested, well fed, ready to go to work.

So the meditation involves a lot of skills. Sometimes we're told that when you meditate, you just accept whatever's coming up or you just learn how to enjoy the present moment or you try to be non-reactive to whatever's coming up. The Buddha never taught that way. He says that there's a whole range of skills you're going to need, because your mind gets itself into different situations, and it requires different skills to deal with those situations in an appropriate way.

Mindfulness is what connects your moments of attention so that they really do observe what's going on. In other words, mindfulness and alertness are always appropriate, but beyond that, you find that different skills are required for

different situations. Sometimes you do have to be non-reactive, just watch what's going on so that you can see what's really happening in the mind. Other times, you see that something is really unskillful, really is harmful, and you can't just sit there and accept it. You've got to do what you can so the mind doesn't get overpowered by it.

It's like being a carpenter with a lot of tools. Learn to use whichever tool is appropriate for right here, right now, then put the tool down so that you can figure out what's needed next. In that way, you find that the skills you develop in the meditation are helpful in all areas. But for the time being, focus on this area right here: the mind in position, the body in position, developing your powers of mindfulness, alertness, and ardency as you deal with the breath.