

Focus on the Doing

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When you focus on your breath, it may seem a strange thing to do with your mind. After all, the mind is for thinking, and you could spend the whole hour thinking all kinds of thoughts. But the question is: What you get out of it? Occasionally you get some use out of your thoughts. Thoughts aren't all bad, but there is a lot of thinking that can make you suffer. Often you may start a train of thinking and not know where it's going to go. It's like train-hopping: You hop from one train to another, and another, and all of a sudden find yourself going off in the opposite direction from where you thought you were going.

What you need to learn is a skill for how to get out of your thoughts, so that if you find yourself on the wrong train, at the very least you can jump off safely. Then when the time comes when you really do have to think about something, your mind is in good shape. It hasn't been wearing itself out with pointless thoughts, pointless ideas, rambling around, going nowhere.

This is the first step in training the mind so that it doesn't cause suffering: giving it a place to stay in the present moment. If you're going to think, think about the breath. In other words, know when it's coming in, know when it's going out, and not only that, notice how it feels. As the Buddha said, two of the factors of the first jhana, the first step in right concentration, are directed thought and evaluation. So direct your thoughts to the breath and then evaluate it, make adjustments.

Start out with a couple of good long deep in-and-out breaths, and see how that feels. If it feels good, stick with it. If not, you can change. Make it shorter, deeper, more shallow, heavier, lighter. There are a lots of ways you can adjust the breath.

Then notice when you get good results, and when you don't. Try to make yourself as sensitive as possible to how the breathing feels. The more sensitivity you bring to the practice, the more you're going to notice. The more you notice, the more comfortable you can make it. The more comfortable you can make it, the easier it is to settle down, so that staying with the breath is not a difficult process. It becomes more and more home base, so that it feels natural to be here.

Then the thinking is something you do only when you really have to. Otherwise, you come back to home base and just watch, be sensitive. This also helps you dis-identify from your thoughts, because all too often we can get into a thought world, get totally absorbed in it, and not really observe what it's doing to us.

When you learn how to dis-identify with your thoughts, you can begin to see thinking as a process. Instead of getting sucked into the content, you see: What is this process of creating thoughts in the present moment? How does it happen? What are the steps? At what point, does a thought world become compelling? At what point do you decide to go with the thought world? And how does that thought world form to begin with?

These are things you can observe only if you're not totally sucked into the thought world. You've got a place where you can stand outside.

It's like driving past a drive-in movie theater at night. If you stop long enough and start looking at the screen, you begin to see a story, and the story pulls you in. It's almost as if there really were people up on the screen. Even if you don't hear the soundtrack, you can start putting together a story of what's happening. But if you look at the screen in another way, you realize there are just flashing colors. There's nobody up there. It doesn't have to be a story. It's only when you supply the story line that you get sucked in.

You see that when a thought arises in the mind, it's not the case that you're a totally passive observer. You're a participant in creating the thought world, and your creation is what gets you sucked in.

You can see this clearly only if you learn how to step out and have a home base that you can return to safely when you step out. So you want to get training in this skill. We often read texts about states of awakening, high states of concentration, and we get impatient. We want to go all the way to the end. There's a Thai phrase, *ruu kawn koed, loed kawn tham*, which means you know all about things before anything has happened in your meditation, you've already mastered a skill before you've even tried your hand at it. It's not said in praise.

So you don't want to get ahead of yourself in the meditation. Realize that this is a training, and it goes step by step by step. The Buddha's analogy is of the continental shelf off of India. There's a gradual slope before the sudden drop off. As part of a gradual slope, there are skills you need to learn: the skill of how to stay with the breath, the skill of how to notice when the mind is beginning to leave the breath, the skill of learning how to bring it back. As for the subtler insights, you're not going to see them until you've really mastered the more blatant ones. And it's not the case that the blatant ones we're working on right now are totally unrelated to the subtle ones. The ability to watch the mind: How are you going to gain insight into the causes of suffering until you've learned how to watch your mind wander off, to catch it wandering off, and to bring it right back? Insights into not-self: How are you going to see those insights unless you've learned how to begin to

dis-identify from your thoughts in the simple way of noticing that you've wandered off the breath and you come right back?

So even though these things may seem basic, and you're impatient to get on to the higher things, you're not really going to get on to the higher things, the subtler and deeper things, until you've gotten really good at the basic ones.

It's like playing the piano. You play the scales over and over and over again, and it's kind of boring. But, once you've really mastered the scales, that skill is going to help you when you play Beethoven, Brahms, or anything else really difficult.

So it's not that you have to master the blatant things and then you drop them to go on to subtler ones. The subtler ones grow out of the blatant ones.

We know about the noble eightfold path. The texts also talk about a tenfold path, the arahant's path. In addition to the eight factors of the eightfold path, there's right knowledge and right release. Right release is interpreted as real concentration, when the mind finally hits a state of concentration that's totally unfabricated, can't be destroyed, can't be affected by anything at all. It builds on the concentration you're doing. It's not that you do concentration and you drop the concentration to move on to insight. The insight lies in learning how to get better and better and better at the concentration, so that you can see the subtle ways in which the mind creates suffering or stress even around the practice of concentration. You're not going to see that until you got really good at concentration.

So approach this as you would any skill. Think of it in terms of a step-by-step-by-step process. Don't try running ahead or anticipating what's going to happen next. If you look very carefully at what you're doing now, that's how you learn.

Sometimes you hear that there's no distinction between the path and the goal, or that the goal lies in the path. What that means is that you look into the practice of what you're doing, and that's where you're going to find the results. In other words, it's not that you just slave away at this practice and then the results are going to come someplace else. It's not as if you're here working on the practice with one eye, with another eye looking down the path to see when those results will hit you from outside. It's in paying full attention to what you're doing: That's when you start seeing the subtler things of the mind.

This is why intentness is one of what they call bases of power or the bases of success in the practice: You give yourself totally to what you're doing. The other factors in the list work around this. In other words, there's the desire—the desire that you really want to do it well. Of course, you really want results, but then again, where are you going to see the results unless you want to do the practice? So

you have to learn how to talk yourself into liking this, into liking how you can use your powers of observation around what you're doing: adjusting the breath, making it more comfortable, until it reaches a point where you don't have to adjust it anymore. It feels really good coming in, really good going out. You settle down with that, stick with that. When you learn how to sensitize yourself to the breath this way, it becomes easier and easier to want to keep doing it again. The path itself becomes enjoyable.

People often forget that. When the Buddha talks about four noble truths, they sound very negative, all about suffering, but only the first two truths are actually negative. The last two—the end of suffering and the path to the end of suffering—are positive. The path to the end of suffering includes right concentration, which includes rapture, pleasure, both physical pleasure and mental pleasure, along with strong solid states of equanimity. When you've learned how to tap into that skill, then the desire to practice becomes more strongly based, and the path becomes enjoyable in and of itself.

As it becomes enjoyable, then the second base for power—persistence—gets more constant, more reliable. You want to keep at it. This doesn't mean just going off to do nothing but meditate, closing your eyes and abandoning the rest of the world. It means that you carry your practice into everything you do. Learn how to be centered and mindful, with a sense of the ease of the body and ease of mind, in all your activities. This is why we not only do sitting meditation, we also do walking meditation. This is why here at the monastery people are not just sitting and walking, but they're also doing chores around the monastery so that we can learn how to carry this sense of ease and well-being through all kinds of activities.

That's what it means to be persistent: You just stick with it, stick with it, but you're working at pleasure, working at well-being.

Then the fourth base for power is using your powers of analysis. When things are going well, notice that, and try to notice *why* they're going well. Also notice if you're analyzing too much. If it destroys your concentration, you drop that for the time being. But when things aren't going well, again try to analyze your actions. See what's going on. Divide everything into basic elements: How is your focus? How is the breath doing in different parts of the body? Are you focusing on the right spot? How about changing to another spot? What kind of attitudes are you carrying into the meditation? Try to notice that as well. If you've come into the meditation all flustered, well, stop and ask yourself: Why are you flustered? If you're upset at somebody, think about why you want to carry that in. What's the source of your being upset?

Sometimes you have to analyze things a little bit before you're ready to sit down and meditate, to get yourself in a proper mood, to develop the proper attitude.

So when things aren't going well, try to break everything down. Don't just say, "My meditation is going poorly," and think of it as one huge monolith that you can't do anything about. Break it down into its component factors. There's the way of your focusing. There's the way the breath is going. There's the place where you're focusing. There's the concept you have of the breath.

Sometimes we have weird ideas, cartoon ideas about how the breath comes in, how the breath goes out, and we try to breathe in line with those cartoon ideas, and that goes against the actual way the breath can flow easily in, easily out. Think of the breath coming in and out of the whole body, through all your pores. There's a way of releasing some of the tension that we tend to add to the breathing process because of our cartoon ideas.

So these are the four things that bring success in meditation. Sometimes we're told not to think about success. Basically what that means, or should mean, is: Don't think about success and failure in unskillful ways. Try to develop a skillful attitude toward what it means to succeed in the meditation. Bring these qualities of the desire to do the practice, the persistence you bring to the practice, intentness on focusing on the causes, being confident that the effects will come if the causes are right. And finally, notice if the effects aren't coming the way you want them to, and come back and analyze things down, break things down.

As Ajaan Fuang once noticed, the seven steps in the Ajaan Lee's instructions on breath meditation are a good checklist. When the meditation doesn't seem to be going well, ask yourself: Are you really focusing on the breath? How about the way the breath feels in different parts the body? Are you allowing the breath energy to flow properly? Where are you centered? Are you centered in a spot that's congenial? Does it feel good there? How about the rhythm of the breath? Are you able to allow all the different breath sensations in the body to flow together? Does it feel like some parts the body are fighting against other parts of the body? Break the meditation down into those questions and you begin to see areas where you might try to change things if things aren't going well.

These are some of the attitudes to bring to the meditation. Notice that the focus here is on *doing* the practice. When it goes well, you don't have to anticipate the results in order to make them come. It's what you're doing right now that makes all the difference. As for distracting thoughts that come up, again, there are many different ways you can deal with them. In some cases, you can just look at

them and let them go, notice that you're distracted and go back to the breath. That's it.

Other times, that doesn't work. The mind keeps getting pulled back, pulled back, pulled back. Sometimes it's thoughts of remorse over the past; sometimes it's worries about the future. If it's remorse of the past, remind yourself: That remorse in the present moment is not going to accomplish anything. It's not the case that if you beat yourself up enough over your past mistakes, future punishment is not going to happen. That's a child's attitude. Instead, remind yourself that what was done in the past was done in the past, but what you're doing right now is important: developing powers of concentration, developing your discernment, your sensitivity to what you're doing in the present moment. This is what gives you a better chance to do things carefully in the future as well and to be able to handle any results of past bad karma that may be lying in wait.

So no matter what thought comes up, there is a way of thinking about it, realizing that it's more in your own true self interest and the interest of the people around you that you come back to your breath, come back your meditation object, and be really sensitive about it.

Other times when there are distracting thoughts, you realize that they may be in the background, but you don't have to focus on them, you don't have to get involved. They can be nibbling away at one corner of your mind, but you can be in another corner. After a while, if you don't pay them any attention, they just go away.

Or you can notice that when distracting thoughts arise, there's a subtle change in the breath energy in different parts of the body. If you can sense that, notice the tension, allow it to relax, and the thought will have no foundation. It'll go away. And getting the mind to settle down doesn't mean you're just beating it down or tying it down to the breath. Sometimes you have to approach it using your intelligence, using your powers of analysis, developing strategies that can get around the pull of your distracting thoughts.

In doing this, you're developing all the various skills that are required to get the mind staying solidly with the breath. You're learning a lot about the mind and how to deal with issues in the mind a lot more skillfully.

This is where insight comes. It's the insight of someone mastering a skill, not of someone who's memorized a text or can impose something you've read someplace onto your experience, and say, Yes, I can see it from that point of view. It's more the insights that come from when you realize, "Oh, I've been doing this, and it's not skillful, and there is an alternative way to do it, one that causes less suffering, that causes less stress."

So it's in the doing that the insight comes. The main intention you're working on here is the intention to get the mind to settle down with more solidity, a greater sense of ease, and you attend to the process. The intention you bring to the process is to see what you're doing that's not quite skillful yet, what you can do to improve on it. This is insight into intention and attention, which are the main factors that normally come out of ignorance, but now you're doing them with knowledge, you're doing them with clarity. The clearer you are about these factors, the less suffering you're going to cause.

So focus on the *doing* of the concentration, focus on doing it well, and the insights you want will develop naturally.