

## *Set Your Heart on the Breath*

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Set your heart on the breath, as that's essentially what concentration means—to have your mind set on something, to have your heart set on something. In the Buddha's vocabulary, the word *citta* means both heart and mind. They don't draw a clear distinction or a line between the two. This knowing faculty includes both knowing and willing. The two inform each other. What you know determines what you will, and what you will determines what you know.

We try to train both of them together. So we focus on the breath as something to know and on the focusing itself as something we've got to will. You have to have a sense that this is important. After all, the breath is the force of life, and it's the best place to know both the body and mind together, because the breath is where the mind and the body meet. It's the aspect of the body that's closest to your awareness. When you move the body, you move it through the breath energy. And if the breath is good, the mind is in a good mood. The body's going to be healthier.

So each time you meditate, remind yourself *why* you're focusing on the breath until you're convinced that it's a good thing. Then you can work on the knowing side, which involves mindfulness, i.e., keeping the breath in mind, remembering each time you breathe in, each time you breathe out, that you want to stay here and what you have to do to stay right here. Then there's alertness: being alert to what the breath is doing and also being alert to what the mind is doing. It's inevitable that the mind is going to wander away. Be alert to the fact that it's going to happen, and keep an eye out for it, so that as soon as you do catch sight of the mind wandering away, you can bring it back. And if it does it again, you bring it back again.

When you're with the breath, try to be as alert as possible to how the breath feels and bring in another quality called ardency, which means you're trying to do this as skillfully as possible. With regard to the breath, this means figuring out where you find it easiest to stay focused on the breath. It might be the tip of the nose, the middle of the chest, the rise and fall of the abdomen—any place in the body where you know clearly that now the breath is coming in, now the breath is going out. You can experiment, focusing on different spots until you find one that feels congenial.

Allow that spot to feel comfortable. Don't squeeze it; don't build a wall around it. Allow it to feel wide open as the breath comes in, wide open as the

breath goes out, and in between the in-breath and the out-breath. Try to maintain that sense of openness all the time. Make it constant, regardless of whether the breath is coming in or out, or whatever it's doing. Sometimes, simply the act of maintaining that sense of openness in and of itself will also adjust the breath, so that the breath feels just right all the way in and all the way out. Sometimes it doesn't, and you consciously have to think about what kind of breathing feels good. Would longer breathing feel good? Would shorter breathing feel good? Experiment and see.

So you've got the mindfulness and the alertness: Those are the knowing side. Then there's the ardency, which is the willing side—the heart side. Everything's gathered here together at the breath. And they're going to keep everything working together as well.

Once the breath feels comfortable, then you can allow that sense of comfort to spread to different parts of the body. Think of it going up and down a line drawn right down through the middle of your body from the head down to the base of the spine—in front, in back, down the legs, out the arms—in whatever way it's going to flow. If you find there's a sense of blockage in any part of the body, think of the breath working around it, working through it.

You may notice that some parts of your body seem to have disappeared. Maybe in your sense of the body, you can't quite place the knee or you can't quite place the shoulder. If you find that happening, notice what you do sense. Suppose your shoulder seems to have disappeared. Well, where is your lower arm? Where is your elbow? Where is your upper arm? Trace it from one end; then trace it from the other side. Where is your chest right now? Where does it go into the shoulder? See where you can get things connected again.

It's strange somehow. If you drew a map of how your body feels from the inside, the parts would be all distorted, some parts would seem to be outside what you know is the outline of the body, and some parts would actually seem to be missing. Try to reconnect everything so that the body as a whole feels like one big, unified field, and the breath energy throughout the body seems to be flowing together nicely throughout the field. Then try to maintain that. Stick with it, because a lot of the meditation is just this: learning how to stick with something, learning how to get it good, and then learning how to maintain it once it is.

It's at this point sometimes that the ardency can sometimes begin to flag. You think, "Well, this feels relaxed enough. Now I can go off and do something else." Well, no. Try to keep coming back, coming back. How really good can you make this? And what's going to happen to the mind if you maintain this state? Some of the effects of the meditation are immediate. When the breath flows well

throughout the body, you feel a lot more relaxed. That's something you can see right away. Other effects are going to take time. It's like a medicine, say, a cream that you put on a rash. You don't just put the medicine on and then immediately wipe it off. You put it on and you leave it there. Over time, the cream will do its work on the rash. If you take it off too soon, it can't do its work well.

So see what happens to the mind if you just stay with this one sensation, the sensation of comfortable breath energy filling the body. Sometimes it'll change on its own. It'll get softer, fainter. This is where it's *really* important to have a strong sense of the whole body breathing in, the whole body breathing out, even if it's a very gentle breath. If you're focused just on one spot, it's very easy to lose focus and go drifting off, especially when it's comfortable. But if your frame of reference is the whole body, then even if the breath stops, you've still got the whole body as your reference point. And you just try to maintain that—again, as steadily as you can, as consistently as you can.

At this point, the quality of ardency means simply maintaining this state as consistently as possible, and trying to keep up your interest in what's happening. The one place this is different from putting a cream on your skin is that you can put the cream on your skin, forget about it, go off and do something else, and the cream will do its work. But here your present awareness has to be there as consistently as possible. You can't put things on automatic pilot. You've got to keep tending to them, watching them. So take an interest in what's it's like to be really still, consistently still, consistently alert, with this broad range of awareness.

Once you've developed this state of mind, you can put it to different uses. But it's important that you focus on this state of mind in and of itself as your first goal in the meditation: getting here and then staying here. If a sense of intense rapture or pleasure comes up, stay focused on the idea of breath, the notion of breath, whatever sensations you can identify as breath. Don't go jumping onto the pleasure; don't go jumping onto the rapture. The act of staying with the breath is the cause for these feelings. If you abandon the cause to wallow in the feelings, they won't last very long. They'll go away. But if you keep reminding yourself that you're directing your thoughts to the breath and you're being alert to evaluate the breath—making sure it feels just right continually, continually, continually—those are the causal factors for right concentration.

Now, you may come to the point where you don't have to direct your thoughts any longer. You don't have to evaluate anything any longer. You just stay right there. As you do that, there's a very strong sense that the mind and the breath become One. It's not that you're on one side of a membrane separating you from the breath. You're there *in* the breath; the breath is in you. If that happens,

maintain that sense of being One with your object. That can bring an even greater sense of rapture, pleasure, and there's not much you have to do with it. Just maintain that focus, that sense of Oneness.

If the rapture seems too strong, make your focus more refined. Again, stay with the breath, the very subtle feeling of energy in the body. After a while, the stronger, disturbing side of the rapture will go away. Then there will just be ease. Your mindfulness will be really strong. Your alertness will be very strong at this point. And it seems like the breath is hardly moving at all, just a little bit of vapor at your skin. It feels like the vapor that comes off an ice cube. The ice cube doesn't move, but there is vapor evaporating off it. Just stay right there.

A couple of years back, I was teaching meditation to a vipassana teacher over the phone. He was having a retreat somewhere else. He'd call up every evening to report what was happening with his breath. For the first two weeks, I kept saying, "Well, stay with the breath; stay with the breath." He began to wonder if that was all the instruction he was going to get for the entire month. After a while, though, things started happening in his meditation. That's when we could talk about other things. But in the meantime, if nothing else is happening, just learn how to stay with the breath.

This is an important skill. It doesn't have a lot of bells and whistles, but the ability to stay consistently with one object is a really important skill to have mastered. And it's a skill both of the heart and the mind. You set your mind on the breath. You set your heart on the breath. It has to be something you really *want* to do. This is one of the bases of success. It's one of the factors in concentration. There has to be the desire followed by the persistence and lots of paying very careful attention to what you're doing.

So remember, you're training both the heart and the mind. If they're trained together and they work together, you can get a lot more use out of them—a lot more happiness out of them—because they're not working at cross purposes. You're training the mind to respect your heart's desire for happiness. You're training the heart to have a respect for cause and effect, for the need to develop a skill in this area. When these two sides of your awareness learn to respect each other, they can do great things.