

## *The Importance of Being Focused*

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As you focus on the breath, it often helps to keep reminding yourself of how important the breath is, and why it's important to be able to train the mind to stay with one thing. The breath is important, because after all it is the force of life. It's what keeps the mind and the body together. And the quality of the breathing is bound to affect the quality of the health of the body, the health of the mind. So as you're focused on the breath, try to allow the breath to be comfortable. Just pose that question to the mind: What kind of breathing would feel best right now? See how the body responds.

If it doesn't seem to respond much in any way, you can push a little bit. Try breathing longer to see how that feels, or shorter to see how that feels. It's good to start with a couple good, long in-and-out breaths to energize the body and get the circulation going. From there you adjust it to see what feels just right: shorter breathing, longer breathing, faster, slower, deeper or more shallow, heavier or lighter. You can experiment with focusing on the breath in different parts of the body, to see which part of the body seems most congenial to stay focused on.

If something else comes into the mind and says, "You've got to think about this. You've got to think about that," you say, "No, right now the breath is more important." Other issues that command your attention during the rest of the day: They've had plenty of chance to get thought about, to get dealt with. You need to be able to reserve some space and time for the breath, so that it can get its due. Otherwise, things that seem pressing push in, push in, and things that are important get pushed out. It's so easy to lose perspective. Some issue jumps up at you and say, "You've got to take care of me right now." And often, without thinking, we just go along with it.

This is one of the important skills of meditating: learning how to say No to things that seem very pressing, very important, very insistent. You now have a different set of priorities, a different set of values. You value the mind. You value the qualities of the mind, so you want to give them first priority. Now you've got the chance. You're sitting here meditating; nothing else is coming in to demand immediate attention, at least nothing is coming in from the outside. Things may bubble up inside, but you have to learn how to say No, No, No. And learn how to anticipate when the mind is going to slip off, so that you can stop it before it gets entangled with these things, so that you don't suddenly realize you've been off, say, five minutes thinking about some issue on the other side of the world.

Learn how to sense when the mind is beginning to leave the breath, and then see what you can do to make the breath more interesting. You might want to breathe a little bit more heavily. Or ask yourself, what would be really, really comfortable right now? Often one of the problems is that the breath starts getting mechanical, and you begin to lose interest. Something else comes in and seems more important. So when a distraction comes up, don't get frustrated by it. Simply regard it as an opportunity to develop your skills, to see how quickly you can recognize in, how quickly you can drop it. When you drop it, you find often that it will go away. Sometimes it may come back, but you can drop it again. If it keeps coming back, then it's a sign you have to remind yourself of why you don't want to go there: the drawbacks of getting involved in that kind of thinking. One of the big drawbacks is the simple fact that you've allowed yourself to get persuaded by it, attracted to it, because you give it importance.

This question of importance shows that breath meditation is not just a technique. It also has to do with your values: what's important in life, what things deserve attention, what things don't deserve attention. If you really believe that the training of the mind is important, that's your main argument against going off with these other thoughts. After all, it is the mind that shapes your experience, first in the sense of choosing what you're going to pay attention to, because there are lots and lots of things that could get your attention right now. If there's a pain in some part of the body, you could focus on the pain and get yourself worked up over that. If there were issues that arose during the course of the day, you could focus on and get worked up over them. Those things would then fill your attention, so that it would seem as if they were the only issues in the world right now. But what you've done is that you blocked out other things to emphasize this or that issue.

As long as the mind is going to do that, it should block out things that are unimportant, things that don't help, and focus instead on things that will help to get the mind under control, will help give rise to a sense of well-being, ease, and clarity in the mind.

You're going to need this talent, you're going to need this skill in your everyday life when emergencies come up. Something difficult arises, something shocking arises, and you don't want to get tied up in how upset or how shocked you are. Instead, you can sit down and say, "Okay, this is what needs to be done." You focus on what needs to be done and don't build up your other reactions. This way, the mind, instead of being its own enemy, becomes its own friend—and a friend to other people, too. If there's somebody you have to help in an emergency, you can focus totally on what needs to be done. As for the things that can't be

done or can't be helped, you don't get worked up over them. You're learning to develop equanimity for things that are not important, and to focus your attention, focus your energy on things that can be changed.

This skill becomes really handy as you get older, as you start suffering illnesses and as you approach death. When an illness arises, it's so easy to get upset about what you suddenly can't do, how the illness is getting in the way of other things you'd like to do. That doesn't help at all. You realize you've got these tools. You've got this skill, working with the breath to help alleviate the pain.

Or at the very least you can give the mind a place in the body where it can stay, where there's a sense of ease, a sense of well-being, so that you don't have to get tied up in the symptoms of the illness. You don't have to get tied up in narratives about how long the pain is lasted, how much longer you think it may last, how upset you are, and how you can even stand it. Don't think about those things. Think about what's happening right now: How are you relating to the pain right now, how are you relating to the comfortable parts of the body right now, how can you use that sense of comfort to give the mind strength, develop its patience, develop its endurance? Because that's a large part of developing endurance: not focusing on the difficult things you have to endure, but focusing instead on your sources of strength, on the skills you have to maximize your strength.

As death approaches, this is going to be an extremely important skill. I was talking a while back to a man who had to be admitted to the ER. His heart was racing; his blood pressure was way out of line. As the doctors told him later, they had fully expected him to die. It was very close. But he was able to get through. What surprised him about the experience was how many distractions there were. He had been practicing meditation but obviously hadn't gotten to the point where he really could stay focused on what he thought should be important when all these other things kept clamoring for his attention: unfinished business with his family, unfinished business with his work, and all the symptoms that were coming up in the body. The body was doing a lot of unexpected things, making it hard for him to think. On top of that, there was the simple fact of being in an emergency room, with all the doctors running around, all the noise, all the other distractions. In cases like that, it's important to be able to stay focused on one thing, to decide, "This is where I want to stay. This is what's important," and to be able to fend off anything else that comes in and gets in the way.

So have a sense of how important this skill is. It's a lifesaver. And even if it doesn't save the life of this particular body, it saves the life of the mind's well-being. Just think about it: in the midst of all the distraction that comes when death suddenly faces you, the first thought is always is, "I'm not ready yet. Why is

it so soon? All this unfinished business.” Well, the world is unfinished business. Always has been; always will be. Just as you can’t wait for ideal circumstances before you start meditating, you can’t wait for ideal circumstances before you die.

So this in and of itself is an important skill: learning how to sit down in the midst of an imperfect situation and get the mind to settle down, to get the mind focused, because at the moment of death, it’s not just a matter of withstanding the pain or the shock or the disbelief. You’ve also got to make choices as to where you’re going to focus your mind when you can no longer stay in the body, when you get squeezed out. Or as in that great line from Borges, “when infinity closes in on you,” where are you going to go? Your body is acting up. If there are people around you, they’re probably being hysterical. And in the midst of all that, you’ve got to make good choices: to deal with the pain properly, to deal with that fact of leaving the body properly.

This means that the primary ability you’re going to need will be this ability to stay focused, to be mindful, to be alert, so that you can use your discernment to deal with the situation as skillfully as possible.

So as you’re sitting here, keep reminding yourself of the importance of being focused, *maintaining* a focus, and of whatever skills you can use to fend off any distractions, because your well-being depends on it.