

## *The Mind in Good Shape*

*May 26, 2009*

The first step when you meditate is to get your body into position. Sit with your back straight, your hands in your lap, your right hand on top of the left. Look forward and close your eyes. That's getting the body in position.

Next step, get the mind in position. Think thoughts of goodwill for yourself, as in the chant we had just now. Tell yourself, "May I be happy. May I find true happiness." Reflect on the fact that true happiness has to come from training the mind, because no matter how good things may be outside, if your mind is in bad shape, you're not going to be happy. Whereas if the mind is in good shape, it doesn't matter how bad things are outside. Even if things get bad in the body when the mind is in good shape, it's not going to suffer.

Once you've thought about how much you'd like to train the mind, then the next step is to actually do it. Focus it on the breath. You need to bring the mind into the present moment because that's where the mind can be changed. You could think about how much you'd like to change your mind in the future or how much you wish you had changed your mind in the past, but that's not going to accomplish anything. You have to bring it right here. One way to guarantee that it's right here is to keep it with the breath. Take a couple of good long, deep in-and-out breaths and see where you feel the breathing process. Send your attention right there.

It can be anywhere in the body, because "breath" is not just the air coming in and out of the lungs. It's the energy flow in the body that brings the air in and lets it go out. It involves the entire nervous system and a lot of the muscles in your torso, in your chest, in your shoulders, in your neck, sometimes in your head. So notice where you're feeling the breathing process and allow it to be comfortable. Allow the breath to settle into a rhythm that feels calm but energizing—basically, a rhythm that you like, something that feels good. If you're going to stay in the present moment, it's easier when you can stay with a sense of comfort and ease.

So explore to see how the breathing feels and what kind of breathing would feel best right now. You can try in long and out short, in short and out long, in short out short, in long out long, deep or shallow, heavy or light, fast or slow. There are lots of different ways to breathe. Each different way will have an effect on the body and, through the body, on the mind. If you find the mind wandering off, bring it right back. It wanders off again, bring it back again.

As you're staying with the breath, you're doing two things. One is that you're directing the mind to the breath and, two, you're consciously *not* directing it to other things. In other words, once you find yourself wandering off to something else, you immediately drop it. You don't have to tie up loose ends of the thought. If you find yourself wandering off, just drop it and come back. Tell yourself you're doing something a lot more important here than just letting the mind wander. You're trying to train the mind, to get it under your control.

An important first step in succeeding in the meditation is getting your mind in a state where it really wants to do it. You see the importance of having a trained mind. You see the dangers of not training the mind. That should inspire you to want to meditate, to want to get the mind under control. After all, the mind is what determines what you're going to be doing in your life, the choices you make, the things you do, say, and think, and these in turn shape your life.

So the shape of your life comes from the shape of your mind. If your mind is out of shape, your life is not going to be a well-shaped life. But if your mind is in a good shape, then even if difficult things happen, you don't feel threatened by them. This, after all, is why people do a lot of unskillful things in life, cruel and thoughtless things: They feel threatened. Something outside important to them gets threatened, then *they* feel threatened, and so immediately they've got to react. But if you can put the mind in a position where its happiness doesn't have to depend on things outside, then it's in a much better position to do and say and think the skillful thing in any situation.

So that's the first step in getting some success in the meditation: having the desire to stick with it, to really apply yourself to what you're doing.

The next step is actually stick with it, keep doing it again and again and again. As in any task, you need practice. If the mind wanders off, you bring it back. If it wanders off again, bring it right back again. Each time you bring it back, reward it. If you just bring it back and beat it with a stick, getting upset about its wandering off, after a while it's not going to want to meditate. It's not going to want to come back. So each time you come back to the breath, tell to yourself, "For this one breath, at least, I want to breathe a breath that's really satisfying, in whatever part of the body seems starved for breath energy."

Now, if you've even practiced a musical instrument or mastered a sport, you know that simply doing it over and over and over again is not going to give you any success, any mastery. You also have to pay attention to what you're doing, so that you notice: Are you doing things in an awkward way? Are you do things in an efficient way? In this particular case, it means noticing how you breathe: Does it really feel good? Or could it be better? Which parts of the body are not feeling

good? How could you make them feel better by the way you breathe? Which parts feel like they're being starved for energy? Try to sensitize yourself to the body as much as you can, sensitize yourself to the breath as much as you can.

Then you notice the mental side: Where are you focusing your attention? Is this the best place to focus? What would happen if you focused it in different places? Some standard ones are around the navel, at the solar plexus, the middle the chest, the base of the throat, the middle of the head, the tip of the nose, the middle of the forehead, the top of the head. But really you can try focusing it anywhere at all to see which spot is your favorite spot.

If you notice the mind wandering off again, bring it right back. If it seems to wander off in one particular direction, then it's time to stop and look at what's the appeal of that particular thought. The mind will usually say it's fun or it's important or whatever. So you have to think about it for a bit. Ask yourself, "Is it really that much fun? Is it really that important? Couldn't I be doing something better with my time?" Learn to see the drawbacks of that particular kind of thinking.

If it's a sensual desire—the desire for sights, sounds, smells, tastes, tactile sensations—tell yourself you've had those things many, many times in your life. Where are the sensual pleasures you had last week? Where they now? They're gone. If you keep on pursuing just that sort of pleasure, what are you going to end up with? A lot of fading memories of things that have passed away. Is that where you really want to look for your happiness?

If you're being pulled away by anger over something, ask yourself: Who's burning up in the anger right now? You're the one who's burning. The people, the situations that have gotten you angry, they know nothing at all about your anger. So who's suffering? You're the one who's suffering from it. And again, where does it get you? Nowhere.

If you're sleepy, do what you can to wake yourself up. Sometimes this means breathing more heavily, changing the place where you're focused. If you tend to focus on the stomach, it can make you sleepy. So if you're feeling drowsy, bring your attention up higher in the body.

If you're feeling restless and anxious, you may want to bring your attention lower in the body. Try to breathe in a way that feels really gratifying each time you breathe in.

In short, if you see the mind wandering off in a particular direction again and again and again, you've got to think about it for a while, contemplate it. Develop the right attitude to that wandering state of mind, so that you don't get sucked in by it.

You try to sensitize yourself as much as possible to what's going on. And if you find yourself heading off in a particular direction again and again, you have to keep using your ingenuity to get around that particular distraction.

These four qualities—developing the desire to practice, being really persistent in what you're doing, being sensitive to what you're doing, and figuring out ways to change things if you find yourself not doing: These four qualities of desire, persistence, sensitivity and ingenuity are the bases for success in your meditation, just as they're the bases for success in any training, any activity at all in the world outside. They come down to bringing in the right attitude, applying the right effort, and being very sensitive and observant as you practice, so that you can get to know your own mind, read your own mind to see what's needed to bring it into a state of balance here in the present moment where it feels really good, really stable being right here. It feels at home right here.

This is basically where everything happens in your life—in the present moment—but for the most part, we're not here. We're off thinking about something else. The decisions we make, the choices we make: All too often we make them without realizing what we're doing because we're distracted. In that way, the forces that are shaping our lives go underground. You find yourself saying things, doing things, and wondering, "Why did I do that?" It's because you're not really paying attention to what's going on right here, right now.

So the breath is a good place to anchor the mind right here and now, giving it a good foundation so that you can start training yourself, gaining a greater sense of self-awareness and self-control. Those are the qualities needed to get the mind in a position where it really can find an inner happiness, an inner sense of stable well-being that can guarantee that, regardless of what's happening outside, the mind is always in good shape and in a position where it can shape your life as skillfully as possible.