

Healing Skills

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When you sit down to meditate, you want to get the body into position and your mind into position. For the body, place your hands in your lap, your right hand on top of your left. Straighten your spine so that it's comfortably straight. You don't have to be ramrod straight like a soldier, but straight enough so that you're not putting any undue pressure on the different organs in your torso. Things feel balanced. Place your hands close to your abdomen. Face straight ahead and close your eyes.

To get the mind in position you focus on the breath. Notice where you feel the breath coming in, or where you feel going out.

Now, getting the body and mind in a position isn't difficult. The difficult part is *keeping* them in position. You want to stay in one posture as long as you can. If you find that the posture is getting so painful that it distracts you from the breath, sit with it for a few more minutes and then very mindfully change the position of your legs or adjust your position in any other way that helps to allow the blood to flow naturally and easily throughout all the parts of the body.

But keeping the body in position is relatively minor. Keeping the mind in position: That's the hard part, because it's very easy for the mind to slip off. It's the fastest thing to change that you can think of. You're here with the breath and all of a sudden you're someplace else. You don't know where you were in the meantime. You thought you were here with the breath, and all of a sudden there you are: the other side of the world.

So you very patiently bring the mind back to the sensation of breathing. Then, to keep it here, you try to breathe in a very comfortable way. When you notice where the sensation of breathing is strongest, also notice whether it feels comfortable or labored. Or does it feel harsh? If it feels harsh or labored, allow it to change. Ask yourself, what would feel better: longer breathing or shorter breathing? Deeper or more shallow? Heavier or lighter? Faster or slower? Then see how the body responds. Keep this up until you find a rhythm that feels good. As long as that rhythm feels good, you stick with it. If, after a while, it doesn't feel so good anymore, you can change.

This requires a couple of qualities. One is mindfulness, which means keeping something in mind. And then alertness: watching what's actually going on. In this case, you're keeping the breath in mind. At the same time, you keep in mind the fact that you could slip off the breath very easily, so you have to be very watchful.

Try to notice when the mind begins to reach out away from the breath to find something else. Part of it seems to be with the breath but another part is reaching out. Like a monkey hanging on a tree: One hand is on the tree trunk, but another hand is reaching out to find another branch to slip off to. When you can sense that, try to get both hands back on the breath. It might be that the breath is not as interesting as it was, it isn't as comfortable or gratifying as it was before, so change the rhythm of the breath.

It also helps to have the right understanding of what you're doing here. The Buddha often compared his teachings to medicine. He was like a doctor, and the practice of his teachings was like giving medicine to yourself. He prescribes the medicine, and you give it to yourself to heal the wounds in the mind.

We often think that we're wounded mainly by events outside, things that are harsh, things that are difficult to deal with, but the biggest wounds actually come from within: our greed, our aversion, our delusion. So what we're doing as we meditate is that we're giving medicine to the mind, at the same time that we're giving medicine to the body. They're often two sides of the same coin. The breath energy in the body is often a reflection of what's going on in the mind, and what's happening with the breath energy is going to have an effect on the mind.

So as you stay with the breath, allow the breath to be comfortable. Once it's comfortable, start think of it as radiating out, this comfortable breath sensation. It doesn't stay in just one spot. Think of comfortable energy radiating out from the spot that you've been focusing on, to the different parts of the body. If you feel any sense of blockage, think of that energy just going around it or permeating through it.

In other words, you don't have to force the energy out, just allow it to gradually make its way, until you feel that when you're breathing in, the breath is a whole-body process of breath energy radiating from the top of the head down the spine out the legs, down the shoulders and out the arms, and all throughout the torso, all throughout the head: comfortable breath energy coming in, comfortable breath energy going out. This soothes the nerves in the body and has a soothing effect on the mind.

Just as the body needs to rest in order to recover from its wounds, the mind needs to rest as well. Let it gain a sense of nourishment from the breath, nourishment from its mindfulness and full-body awareness, and allow it to stay there. Tell yourself, there's nothing else you have to do right now, nowhere else you have to go. Just stay right here. Allow the mind and the body to be healed.

Here's the breath as medicine. It's like a salve you put on the wound, or cream you put out an itch. It's not the case that you put it on and then immediately wipe

it off. Once you put it on, you've got to let it stay there as long as possible so that it can have its gradual healing effect.

The same with the mind and the breath, the same with the body and good breath energy: The longer these things can stay together, the greater the healing effect.

The good thing about this medicine is that it's free. And you can take it with you wherever you go. It's not a thing. It's a skill, a healing skill. This way, whatever comes up in the mind, you have a way of healing the wounds in the mind. Whatever comes up in the body, you find the breath actually has a lot of impact on the way different illnesses going on in the body. Any illnesses that come from stress or tension will gradually disappear. As for other illnesses, even though working with the breath may not may them go away, at least you find yourself suffering a lot less from the illness, suffering a lot less from the pain, because you learn how to manage the pain from within.

Wherever there's a sense of blockage around a particular pain, you can breathe through it, so that the pain is less oppressive. You can find other parts of your energy body that are not in pain and you can focus there, so that you don't feel surrounded and oppressed by the pain.

So each time you breathe in, think: healing breath. Each time you breathe out, it's a healing breath. It's a breath combined with your alertness and your patient mindfulness, knowing that sometimes the effects will take time but, hey, it's better than not having these skills at all. If you find that you've slipped off, just come right back and breathe in a healing way again. When you come back, reward yourself with an especially good breath, one that feels really, really satisfying. Just pose the question in mind: What kind of breathing would feel really gratifying right now? Allow the body to breathe in that way.

And of course, when it breathes that way once, why stop with once? Ask yourself again: What kind of breathing would feel good *now*? How about *now*? Each breath coming, in going out, ask yourself: Where would this breath feel best? After all, the breath is a whole-body process. When you breathe in, the entire nervous system is involved—part of it more blatantly than others, but the whole nervous system is involved.

So if you have a feeling that the whole body is breathing in coordination—it's breathing in in harmony, breathing out in harmony—that harmony has a lot to do with the healing effect here. When the mind stays here and isn't jumping around all over the place, it has a healing effect on the body, and then the mind itself gets healed by this process, too.

So think of this as a medical treatment that you can take with you wherever you go. It's always available because the breath is always here. As long as you're alive, here is the breath right here. The only other ingredients you need are the mindfulness and the alertness, plus a quality the Buddha called ardency: Give it your full attention, put your whole heart into it, really try to be skillful as you do this. The greater the skill and sensitivity you bring to this process, the greater the healing effect.

What you're doing is taking advantage of the medicine that's right around you, right here. They tell the story of the Buddha's own personal doctor. He was the son of a courtesan who had actually thrown him off on to a garbage heap. She didn't want to have a son, so she threw him on a garbage heap. A prince happened to come along, riding on his elephant. He saw the baby on the garbage heap, so he took him home to the palace and raised him. As the boy got older, the other boys in the palace taunted him: "We know who our mother and father are. Who are your mother and father?" So the boy went to ask the prince, and the prince said, "I don't know who your mother is. But since I raised you, I consider you my son."

The boy realized, though, that this was very precarious position, to be in a palace without any real connections. So he went off to study to be a doctor. He studied for seven years. He began to wonder: When was the end of this course of study going to come? So he asked his teacher, and the teacher said, "Well, take a basket and a pair of shears, and go around the city." This was Taxila, Northern Pakistan. "Go around the city for a radius of 10 miles, and if you find any plants that are not medicinal, bring them back." So the boy went around the city for a radius for 10 miles, came back, and said, "There are no plants out there that are not medicinal. Everything has a medicinal use." His teacher said, "Okay, you've completed your training."

The principle here is that there's medicine everywhere if you know where to look for it, and fortunately, for the heart and mind, the most important medicine is right here, as close as possible: your breath, your mindfulness, your alertness, your awareness here in the present moment. When you bring these things together with ardency and keep them together in a way where they fit together and feel good together, that's medicine for the body, medicine for the mind.

So try to take advantage of the fact that medicine is always here. It's just a question of whether you're going to use it or not.