

## *What You Bring to the Meditation*

*June 18, 2011*

Take a couple of good, long, deep in-and-out breaths, and see how it feels. Does it feel good? If it feels good, keep it up. If it starts feeling labored, you can change the rhythm. You can shorten the in-breath, you can shorten the out-breath, or you can shorten both of them. They can be longer or shorter, heavier or lighter, faster or slower, deeper, more shallow. Try to get a sense of what really feels good. Then, make up your mind that you're going to stay with the breath.

This requires that you bring a couple qualities of mind to this project. One is mindfulness. You have to remember not to wander off. That's what mindfulness is: keeping in mind fact that this is where you want to stay. Other thoughts will come up, but you have to keep reminding yourself, "No, you're not going to go with them. You want to stay with the breath. You want to explore the breath energy here."

Then, you have to be alert to notice what you're doing, to notice how things are going with the breath, and to notice when the mind is beginning to wander away. Sometimes it seems to go in a flash; other times, it's a more gradual process. It begins to lose a little interest in the breath and starts casting around for something else to do. If you detect that happening, take another good, long, deep, in-and-out breath. Try to find a way of breathing that feels really gratifying.

If you've noticed that you've wandered off, just come right back. That requires a third quality: ardency. In other words, you really want to do this well. It's not just a matter of saying, "Well, if it happens it happens; and if it doesn't happen, it doesn't happen." That attitude won't get you anywhere. Your attitude has to be, "I want to make this work." We're here to train the mind.

At the end of the hour, you want to be able to say, "I learned something." It may not be what you expected to learn, but always view the opportunity to sit and meditate as a learning opportunity. Some days you may learn what a distracted mind is like, but you don't learn that simply to accept the fact. While it's happening, if you can't figure out any way to deal with it, just try to be with at least the part of the mind that's on the breath, as the rest of the mind goes ranting and raving about whatever it's worked up about. The purpose here is to figure out: How can you cut through those rants and raves?

It's like in the old days when they learned Russian in order to figure out the Russians—not because they wanted to be friendly with the Russians, because they regarded the Russians as their enemies. But you had to learn Russian if you

wanted to understand them. It's the same with the distractions of the mind. You have to study them if you want to get past them. You're not studying them in order to accept them, love them, and think nice thoughts about them. We're trying to figure them out: Why do these distractions have such power over the mind?

This is where the quality of ardency comes in. You really want to stay with the breath, and you want to stay with it skillfully. You want to learn something here and try to master a skill. The ardency, in turn, requires four other qualities in order to succeed. The first is desire. You really have to *want* to do this well. You realize that the mind is in a mess if it's not trained, and that you're causing problems not only for yourself but also for others if you allow your mind to stay untrained.

You realize that what you need is some peace of mind. You have to want that. You have to want it in such way that you don't destroy the peace, but at the same time you do have to put in the effort. That requires desire. Even though the desire starts by focusing on the results you want, you have to learn how to change the focus slightly by learning how to desire the causes—whatever is required to get things right.

That requires persistence. That's the second of what the Buddha calls the four bases of success, or the four bases of power. Here we're talking about the power of your concentration and success in your concentration. Desire is the first; persistence is the second. The Pali word for persistence here, *viriya*, can also mean energy. You really put your effort into it. Now, this doesn't mean that you have to stress and strain all the time. It simply means that you keep at it. You learn what level of an energy you can apply in a way that's consistent. You hold steadily with the breath, trying not to let there be any lapses. You figure out what needs to be done, and then you try to do it.

That figuring out requires the other two bases of success. The first one is *citta*, or intentness. You really pay careful attention to what you're doing and what's going on. You're not just going through the motions. Try to be as sensitive as possible to how the breath feels, as sensitive as possible to how the mind is comfortable or uncomfortable with the breath, whether it feels well-settled or doesn't feel well-settled. You have to pay attention, and you have to notice, if things aren't going well, why not? Try to figure it out. Is it a problem with the breath? Is it a problem with the mind?

Then, use your ingenuity. That's the fourth base of power. If things aren't going well, try this or try that. Maybe you're not focused on the right spot. If you find being focused in the head is giving you headaches, move your focus down into the

throat, into your chest, down to the abdomen. If the process of breathing feels laborious, ask yourself, “How do I perceive it?” Do you feel that you have only these two little tiny holes in the nose to get the breath in and out? How about if you think of the breath energy as coming in and out all the pores? After all, it does. It’s *breath energy* we’re focusing on here, not just air coming in and out. We’re focusing on the energy flow in the body that goes through all the nerves, all the blood vessels, out to every pore of your skin. Think of all the pores being wide open, so that when you breathe in, energy can come in from any direction. See what that does.

So, it’s the qualities of mind that you bring to the practice that really make all the difference. Here, the breath is pretty much the same breath. You can change it a little bit to make it more comfortable, but what really makes a difference is the mindset you bring to the practice. This may seem paradoxical. We’re trying to train the mind, so why does it require good qualities from the very beginning? It’s because you can’t get good qualities in mind to grow without having some good qualities already there. Fortunately, we all have good qualities to some extent. We just take the good qualities we already have and we learn how to develop them and make them grow.

So these are all the aspects of ardency: the desire, the persistence, the intentness of your focus, the intentness of your attention, and then your ingenuity. This is the ability to analyze the problem, figure it out, and try a new solution; then, figure that out. Is it working? If it’s not working, you try again. All these things work together, so that it’s not just in out, in out. The mind is growing. The mind is feeding itself with its own good qualities, using the breath as its focal point. In this way, you really do learn things in the course of the session.

This is basically what we’re here for. We’re here to learn. Sometimes the results come out the way we want; sometimes they don’t. At the end of the session, if you thought that something did go especially well, try to remember what it was that went well. Which means, of course, that you have to be attentive all the way through, so that you can remember when it went well and where you were focused. What was the quality of the breathing? What was the quality of your awareness of the body as a whole? Try to remember that, and see if you can re-create that the next time around.

If things aren’t going well, just sit and watch. Try to figure out what’s happening. Try a few different approaches. Pull out all the tricks in your bag. If nothing works, well, just sit and watch. “Maybe there’s something new I can learn here. Maybe there’s something I didn’t notice before.” You often find as you meditate that there seem to be periods of progress, and then you’re suddenly back

at square one. Well, it's time to go over the old territory again. Maybe there's something you missed the first time around.

So, it's good to reflect on the basics—both if you're beginning, and if you're experienced—to remind yourself of exactly where you are, what you're doing, and what the territory is. You've probably had the experience of losing something and then walking over a piece of ground several times, looking for it. Around about the fourth or fifth time you find it. It's in the same place you've been walking past and looking at, but this time you notice it.

It's the same with the meditation. You go back and forth over the breath, again and again, in and out, in and out, but you discover that there are different things to see, details you may have missed before or connections you've missed.

So, it's the same territory over and over again, right here at the breath, where the mind and the body meet, right now in the present moment. But you find that if you look at it repeatedly and use these qualities of mind—mindfulness, alertness, and the four qualities that help to develop your ardency: desire, persistence, intentness, and ingenuity—you find that you bring these qualities in different mixtures to different sessions. Maybe just a slight change in the qualities you bring to the practice will enable you to see something you didn't see before, even though it was there, staring you right in the face, all the time.

So even though it's the same territory, there's always something new to see. Which means: Pay careful attention. There's always something to learn.