

# *Monotasking*

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When we focus on the breath, we're monotasking. We've got one thing to do right now, and that's to stay with the breath. For those of us who are used to multitasking, we feel at loose ends. It's as if we'd grown lots of extra hands to take care of our multiple tasks all at once, and now all our extra hands don't know what to do. That's when it's good to think about the fact that the breath isn't just a single task, it's a monotask. In other words, it demands your full attention.

The Buddha gave 16 instructions for how to stay with the breath. There was a time when a monk told the Buddha he was already practicing breath meditation, and the Buddha asked him, "What kind of breath meditation are you doing?" And the monk said, "I just let go of any thoughts of the past, put aside any hankering after the future and then, with equanimity, stay with the present moment as I breathe in and breathe out"—which is a very simple, one-technique breath meditation. And the Buddha said, "There is that kind of breath meditation, but it's not the kind that gives the best results." Then he laid out his 16 steps.

The important thing to remember about the 16 steps is that the four tetrads focus on four different aspects of what you're doing. As you're meditating, they give you four things to focus on. They remind you that there are four things you've got to take care of because, as with any genuine monotask, when you really focus your attention on it, you realize there are lots of parts to it, lots of sides to it. Most tasks, when they get squeezed into a multitasking environment, get stripped down to a single, basic thing. They become tasks with one dimension, or at most two. But when you stay with the breath, it's an all-around task that requires your full attention.

On the body side, you're trying to be aware of the full body as you breathe in and breathe out. You gain a sense of how the breath has an impact on the different parts of the body, and then you try to calm that impact. First, as the Buddha says, you allow it to seep and permeate through the body, so that whatever part of the body needs nourishment gets the breath nourishment it needs. That's when the body can calm down. If it hasn't been nourished, it's not going to calm down; it's going to be irritated. That's the body side.

Then there's the feeling side. How do you breathe in a way that allows the potentials in the body for pleasure and rapture to show themselves? Where are those potentials? If you sit very still, don't let the motion of the breath run over the still sensations that are already there. Just allow each sensation to have its little space. You'll begin to realize that there are

some spots in the body where there's a potential for fullness. Everything seems balanced, just right. As you breathe in and breathe out, protect those spots. When you can maintain them, allow them to grow. This is part of what nourishes the body. These different facets of the practice—the body and feelings—are not totally separate. They connect.

Then you begin to notice that how you perceive the body is what allows these feelings to happen. When the Buddha talks about mental fabrication, this is what he's talking about: He's talking about the feelings and the perceptions, those images or the labels you have in the mind. What's your image of the breath coming in? What's your image of the whole process of breathing? If it feels like it's creating a rough breath, try to change it. Think of the breath as something much more subtle and smooth: the breath seeping in through the spaces between the atoms, or whatever image you hold in mind that allows the breath to flow without any obstruction anywhere in the body at all and allows everything to connect up. This allows for the feelings to grow calm as the perceptions become calmer and have a more calming effect on the mind.

That's the feeling side leading into the mental side. You have to be aware of what state your mind is in as you sit down to meditate. Is your energy level up, or is it down? Are you feeling in a good mood or are you feeling down? Is your mind jumping all over the place? Well, there are antidotes. Even though this is monotasking, there are other techniques you can bring in to help.

One of the first strategies the Buddha talks about is gladdening the mind. How do you gladden the mind? Well, you can think about the Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Sangha. What aspects of the Dhamma do you find inspiring? Or the Buddha's example—how you find him inspiring. Or the example of any of the members of the Noble Sangha: men, women, children, old people, young people—people with problems a lot worse than yours, yet they were able to overcome them. And think about yourself. The Buddha has you think about your generosity and your virtue.

I remember reading once about a woman who was studying meditation in Asia, and her meditation was beginning to get very dry. Her teacher told her to reflect on her virtue. But all she could reflect on was how she had broken precepts in the past and all the other horrible things she did, and that, of course, got her in a worse mood. He said, "No, no! Think about the positive things, the times when you did stick by the precepts." It's notable that most of us have trouble doing that, but it's good to remind yourself. And if you have a lot of trouble reminding yourself, go out and take the precepts and be very careful about observing them so that you notice: Okay, you had the chance to break that precept, but you didn't. That helps with your self-esteem. The same with the

reflection on your generosity: If you can't think of any times when you've been generous, go out and be generous. Be the news you want to meditate on.

Remember, this practice is not just meant to be squeezed into the cracks of your life as it already is. You have to ask yourself: Is this the kind of life that's conducive to meditation? If there's not much generosity in terms of material things, or your time, or your energy, or your knowledge, well, go out and be generous. Find opportunities to be generous that make you feel good, that lift your spirits. It doesn't have to cost you any money at all. Just find some time to be helpful to somebody. That's a form of generosity, to share something that you have in terms of your knowledge or your energy. Then when you sit down to meditate and the mind starts feeling dry, you can reflect on that.

Now, you'll find that one act of generosity can be reflected on only a limited number of times before it starts getting dry, so you have to keep it up, keep being generous as a habit. It's a part of the practice all the way along the line.

So those are some of the ways in which you gladden the mind.

But if you find that the mind is jumping all around like a ping-pong ball, you've got to steady it. If you find that focusing on one spot in the body is not enough, focus on two at the same time. I knew a retired schoolteacher in Thailand whose technique for getting into concentration was to, as she said, "Think of hooking up a battery to two spots." One spot was in her head; the other spot was in her tailbone. And it was as if there was an electric cord connecting the two. As soon as the battery was hooked up to both poles, light came into her body. But whether or not you get light, at the very least you can get really riveted into the present moment that way.

Another way to steady your mind is to use *buddho* as a meditation word. Just think of it: Every cell in your body is saying *buddho* as you breathe in and as you breathe out. There's no part of the body that's not participating. That can really get you fully into the present moment. You really want to inhabit the present moment as fully as you can. Because if you don't inhabit the present moment with good breath energy and good awareness, who's going to be inhabiting your body? What energies are going to be inhabiting your body? You don't know. So take this as an opportunity to settle down.

The third step the Buddha gives in dealing with the mind is releasing the mind. In other words, if you find there's something burdening the mind, a particular thought, try to locate where in the body there's the physical sensation that corresponds to that thought. There will be a little hitch or a little spot of tension; see if you can breathe through that. If it's something really tenacious, ask yourself if you can think the thought

through to the point where you realize you have no desire to be with that thought—at all. Part of you may say, “Well, I already don’t want to be with that thought.” But maybe you’re hiding another part of the mind that *does* like to be with that thought. Remember, the mind has lots of different agendas going on all at once, especially if you’ve got a multitasking mind. Some agendas will hide behind others. You have to create a space in which you can allow them to come to the surface, and you can see them for what they are. Only then can you let them go.

That’s the mind part. So the three facets are body, feelings, and mind: These are the main elements in the breath meditation.

As for the fourth set of steps: In the beginning, this has to do with how you deal with distractions as they come up. The Buddha recommends seeing them as inconstant. Anything you’re going to be thinking about that pulls you away from the breath, remind yourself: This is not lasting; this is not reliable. Whatever pleasure it promises is going to last only for a little bit of time, and then it’s going to change. If you want, you can watch the level of stress that goes up as you think about something. Then try to notice how it goes down when you let it go.

Whatever way you can think about these distractions that allows you to let them go... Sometimes you don’t have to think about them that much. Just noticing that “this” is a distraction, you drop it, and you’re back. Other times, you have to question and probe. “Why does this keep coming back, coming back, coming back?” If you can’t figure it out, just ignore it for the time being. It can have a little bit of space in your mind, but you don’t give it the whole mind. You’ve got your object here with the breath and the feelings and the mind-state. You’ve got plenty of things to keep you occupied. When you finally develop a sense of dispassion for the distraction, then you can let it go and you’re fully back with the breath.

So even though this is a monotask, it’s not a monoculture. In other words, it’s not just one type of tree again and again and again and again, row after row. There are lots of elements to this one skill. You’re balancing lots of different things, so it may take a while to gain that sense of balance. But realize that it’s really worth the effort and the time.

One of the main problems with multitasking is that it teaches you to be very impatient. You want something done as quickly as possible because there’s the next thing that has to be done and then the next. But this is a task where you’re planning to move in and stay. It’s the difference between renting a hotel room and actually moving into a house. With a hotel room, you don’t have to make repairs. And you don’t want to spread your things out too much because you’ve got to pack everything up and move. But here, you’re going to move in and spread out—settle down.

It takes a different range of skills, but they're all very worth developing, because this then becomes something you can carry out into the rest of your life —not as just one more task to do in the midst of all your many tasks. This is the foundation where you stand as you do your other tasks. But if you're going to stand here, first you've got to make this really solid and balanced. It takes time, and it takes patience, and it takes careful attention. But it more than rewards the effort put in.