

Solidly Here

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One of the central principles of the Buddha's teachings is that we have to take responsibility for our own actions.

If we spend too much time thinking about what other people should be doing or how they should be getting along, we tend to miss what we're doing, what we're getting along with. We don't really see the impulses coming out of our own minds because we're concerned about what everybody else should be doing.

So when you realize that you're leaving untended the area where you actually are responsible, that's when you're ready to practice.

That's why we meditate: because our actions do come out of our minds, our intentions, and that's something you can be responsible for. Things that pop into the mind may be coming from who-knows-where, but what you do with them right now: That's important.

We meditate so that we can be very clear about that: to see what's happening and gain some control over all these various impulses.

So focus in right here. The breath is a good place to focus because it's a guarantee that you're in the present moment. It's also right where the mind and the body meet. If the mind is going to have an impact on the body, it does it through the breath energy. And it's through the breath energy that we sense the body.

So the breath is like a checkpoint. Everybody has to go through right here. Your intentions go out through the breath, and the way you feel your body from the inside comes in through the breath.

Think of the breath as a whole-body process. It's the sense of energy flowing through all the nerves, all the various parts of the body, as you breathe in, as you breathe out. Certain parts are going to be doing more work than others, and in the beginning you want to focus there. Where do you sense the movement of the breath most clearly? Try to stay with that. Let that be your anchor.

Then try to make that center broad and open. If you clamp down on it, things get very uncomfortable very quickly. So you want to be centered, you want to be very steadily here, but you also want to have a sense of openness around your focus.

And look at the quality of the breath itself. When you're breathing in, does it feel tense? Does it feel constricted? When you breathe out, are you pushing things out? Try to have a smooth breath coming in and a smooth breath going out. See

how that feels.

If the breath seems to be still for a minute between the in-breath and the out-breath or between the out-breath and the in-breath, allow it to be still. Just stay right there, centered with this sense of the whole body as your foundation, as your framework.

For the time being, whatever other thoughts come up, you don't have to deal with them. Just let them go, let them go. You're trying to create the sense of solid center right here.

It's only when your awareness is solid and your gaze is steady that you can see things clearly in the mind. You can understand the intentions that form around sights, sounds, smells, tastes, tactile sensations, feelings, perceptions, fabrications—the whole gamut. They're going to form right here and they're going to play out right here.

If you don't stick with them, you don't see how things play out. You don't see how a cause leads to an effect—or even what the causes are.

Greed may be coming up and you don't recognize it as greed—at least in the very beginning. After a while, it begins to grow and then you start realizing, “Oh, I've got a problem here.” The same with anger: Sometimes it starts as a minor irritation, and then you find it building.

Delusion is hard to see. The best way to deal with delusion is to act on what you think is the best option and then see what actually happens as a result. Over time, you learn more and more about where you're deluded about what causes what.

All of this requires that you be able to see things over time as the process plays itself out—which means you have to stay right here. You can't just check in every now and then and then go running off someplace else and then check in again. A lot of important things can happen in between.

It's like running in and out of a room where a TV is on. You hear bits and snatches of the news reports and then you run out for a while and then you come back again and you're not really sure: Are they talking about the same report, or something else? You weren't there for the whole story.

You want to be here for the whole story, which means you have to get really solidly centered.

This requires desire, along with a strong sense of self. Sometimes we hear we're supposed to have no sense of sense of self at all as we practice, but that doesn't work. You need a healthy sense of self that keeps you directed, realizing that you are responsible for your actions and you want to do them well.

Ajaan Suwat used to make the point that the Buddha would often talk about

how, say, the aggregates are not-self or the senses are not-self. But he never says that about karma. There's the passage we chant regularly: "We're the owners of our actions." This is something we really are responsible for.

Our actions right now are to get the mind to settle down so that we can look at our other actions clearly.

Whatever comes up in the mind: It might be a great insight, it might be some incident from the past, something you're anticipating in the future, but everything that's not directly related to the breath doesn't belong here right now. So you let it go, let it go.

If you find yourself getting snagged on something, do what you can to quickly untangle the snag and then get back to the breath.

As you get more at ease with the breath, it's important that you develop a really large, full-body awareness. Otherwise, with the comfort of the breath, it's very easy to start drifting off.

So as soon as things get comfortable, you've got work to do. You can examine the breath sensations in the different parts of the body, going through things systematically. Remember to look in areas that you tend to overlook. How's the breath between your toes right now? How's the breath between your fingers? How about in your ears? Try to make a thorough survey.

If you don't notice anything, tell yourself, "Well, okay, I don't notice anything right now, maybe I'll make another survey around the body later, when I get more sensitive to things." Because it does require a certain sensitivity to pick up on these things so that you can sense when the breath energy is flowing well, when it's not flowing well—and if it's not flowing well, you can sense what the problem is. Sometimes a blockage seems to be in one place but its real cause is in another place. Sometimes the cause is mental, sometimes physical, sometimes a combination of the two. These are things you can sort out here.

Taking an interest in this is what's going to keep you here alert and awake. Otherwise, you drift in, drift out, and get into what Ajaan Lee calls delusion concentration, where everything is shapeless and formless and you're not really sure where you are. It feels nice but it's not a basis for any kind of real mindfulness or alertness.

When things are comfortable, give yourself work to do here in the body. In addition to working with the breath energy in the different parts, you can visualize, say, the bones. Where are your finger bones right now? Where are the bones in the palm of your hand? Where are the bones in your forearm? Your upper arm? The shoulder? Start down with the toes and work up the legs, through the pelvis, up the spine, into the skull. Visualize the different bones and then ask

yourself, “Where are they right now?”

In other words, whatever keeps you here in the body in the present moment with a sense of interest: That’s what will help establish your foundation.

Once you’ve worked through all the energy knots in the body and worked through, say, the bones or whatever other organs you want to look at, and it’s time to settle down, find a spot that feels at ease and is one of the what you might call the major intersections in the body, where different breath channels seem to come together.

The breastbone is a convenient one. Or the base of the throat, or down at the abdomen, or anywhere you sense that you have a tendency to be very sensitive and to tighten up when something happens to surprise you or shock you or disturb you. If you can maintain a sense of relaxed openness right there at that spot, that sense of openness will spread.

Then you stay there and think of your awareness spreading as well. See how long you can maintain that sense of being centered but with a broad awareness—with nothing else you really have to do. How long can the mind stay unoccupied like this? It’s a skill. And part of the skill is overcoming the voice that says, “Well what’s next? What’s next?” Nothing next is going to happen until you’ve got this down. Or if it does happen, it’s not going to be very solid.

So if you want solid results in the meditation, you’ve got to create a solid state of mind, you have to have a solid determination. You’ve got to stick with this, regardless of what other voices in the mind say, such as, “This is dumb. You’re not thinking about anything.” You don’t have to think about anything right now. Get some practice in just being aware. If a voice says, “You’re irresponsible.” the answer is, “No. I’m being very responsible.”

After all, the source of all action comes from right here. If you don’t keep a good eye on the source, who knows what’s going to come out? Sometimes it’ll slip right past you and you won’t know what happened.

So try to get settled right here, because all the important work is going to happen right here—and you need to be settled in order to do it.