

The Steadiness of Your Gaze

Thanissaro Bhikkhu

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Getting into position to meditate isn't all that hard. First you get your body into position: your back straight, your head facing straight forward, your eyes closed, your hands in your lap.

Then you get your mind into position: Just focus it on the breath. The breath is right here. You don't have to search around too much to find it. The difficult part lies in *keeping* the mind in position, trying to maintain a steady awareness. That takes some doing because the mind is used to *not* being steady. It's used to jumping around. It has a sense of there being some entertainment value in jumping around. You get bored with one thing, so you jump to something new.

And for a lot of people, that's where their freedom lies: in their ability to think about anything they want to. But when you come right down to it, how much happiness comes from jumping around like that? Once you jump from one thing, you know you're going to have to jump to another thing and then to another. So no matter where you land, you start finding yourself immediately tensing up, ready to jump again, which leaves the mind constantly in a state of tension.

So when we meditate, we give it a good, solid place to stay, and then we remind it: You can stay there. You don't have to jump. That way the mind can begin to relax a lot of its tension and can actually dissolve into the object of the meditation. When you focus on the breath, you want to become one with the breath. When you focus on the body, let your awareness become one with the body – not an awareness ready to jump someplace else, but an awareness that seeps into the body, saturating everything down to your fingers and toes.

The steadiness of your gaze is what's going to help things seep into one another, to come together here in the present moment. So as you stay with the breath, try to keep your gaze – your focus on the breath – as steady as you can, as continuous as you can. The more continual your focus, the more you see how things are actually connected, actually related to one another. If your gaze isn't steady, you end up connecting things in your imagination.

It's like playing connect-the-dots with your mind. There's a little bit of awareness here, and another little bit of awareness there, and then someplace else, and as for what was happening in between, you're not really sure. But you can guess, so you draw your own lines to turn the dots into a duck or an airplane. And whether those lines actually correspond to reality or not, whether the dots were parts of a duck or an airplane or something else entirely, you don't really know because you weren't there. You were off someplace else. This is the

way most people's knowledge of the world gets built up: It's a game of connect-the-dots, with very few dots and a lot of lines.

So when we meditate we try to erase all the imaginary lines and make the awareness itself the line that connects things. The Buddha gained Awakening because he saw cause and effect and how they are connected. *When this is, that is. From the arising of this comes the arising of that.* That's how he described one of the central insights in his Awakening. He directly saw these things as they were connected, and that was because his awareness was connected.

So we stay with the breath as a way of developing this continuous, connected, steady awareness. If you find yourself letting up in your focus, just come right back.

In the beginning, our awareness is like the phrases in music: There's a phrase and then a pause, another phrase and then a pause. But what you want to do as you meditate is to develop an awareness that doesn't come in phrases and pauses, that just keeps going, going, going, just as the breath keeps going.

There may be a rhythm to the breathing, but underneath the in-and-out breath is another level of breath energy that's continually there. It's like a background noise in the body. And to make your awareness continuous, that's what you want to focus on: this background energy. Sometimes you notice it as the energy in the body during the pauses between the in-breath and the out-breath and between the out-breath and the in-breath. There's a slight pause in the breathing, and yet there's still energy in the body that lets you know that the body's sitting here. It doesn't totally dissolve away.

The more you tune in to this more subtle level of energy, the less you need the in-and-out breath as your focus. The in-and-out breath becomes just one aspect of a larger field of breath energy that begins to grow more and more calm, more and more calm, because you're down on another level. You've tuned in to another level that's more continuous, that can be used as a basis for insight. When your awareness is continuous and the breath is continuous, you just stay there together. That's what we're working toward.

So try to be sensitive to even the slightest lapse in your awareness. Don't wait until the mind has already left the breath before you register what's happened. Sometimes you feel a stirring in your awareness. Something wants to move. Things aren't as interesting as they were, or for some reason or another the mind begins to let up a little bit before it actually moves on to something else. Learn how to detect that. Then work with the breath, work with your focus in a way that can get around that tendency to stir a little bit and move on.

This is why it's so important that the breath be comfortable. The more comfortable it is, the easier it is to stay with it. Once it's comfortable, then you have to watch out for the mind's tendency to lose its focus, lose its sharpness. That's why we work with spreading the breath energy through the body, being aware of the different parts of the body as a way of keeping ourselves awake and

alert even though things are getting comfortable – because when we meditate we're here to do work, not just to zone out or have a little stress reduction.

The reason we've reduced the stress and made the mind more comfortable in the present moment is because it's got work to do in the present moment. There are things it's got to figure out. It's got to figure out why it's causing suffering, exactly *where* it's causing suffering. The Buddha emphasized the issue of karma and intention, so we look to see: What intentions are there in the mind that make us suffer? Why don't we see them? Why do we feel that those choices are so necessary that we even forget they're choices?

These are some of the big questions we've got to figure out. And the only way to figure them out is to stay right here continually, because those choices are usually made in the gaps, in the seams in our awareness when we're off someplace else. In fact, when there's a seam or a gap in your awareness, it's usually a sign that a choice is going to be made in the mind. It's the mind's way of fooling itself, of hiding all of its choices behind the curtains.

So when you sense that tendency to want to leave, remember: Something important's coming up. If you're not here to see it, you're going to miss it. Don't follow the same old pattern that you've followed who knows how many times, letting the mind hide important things from itself. Why is it hiding? Well, look into it. What is it embarrassed about? What is it ashamed to show itself? What is it trying to deny? When you're operating from a sense of steady comfort then it's easier to look into those issues and not run away.

So this issue of steadiness is very important. It allows you to see things that you otherwise wouldn't see. It plows right through the gaps in your awareness in which the mind hides things from itself, and it zeros in on the big issues in the mind: Why is the mind causing itself suffering? Why is it causing itself stress in ways that don't have to be there?

In the context of the Three Characteristics, the Buddha does point out that anything fabricated is stressful, but in the Four Noble Truths he focuses more on the issue of the stress of clinging and craving. The craving causes the clinging, and the clinging to the five aggregates is his basic definition of stress and suffering. That's what we've got to work on, because that's the part of stress and suffering that's not necessary. Once it's taken care of, then the other stresses in the world are not an issue at all.

So what is this clinging? What is this craving? How and why do we hide it from ourselves? How can we learn to see through it? Ignorance is what allows these things to happen in the mind, and the only way to combat ignorance is to be as steady and consistent as possible in maintaining your awareness.

What this means is that being steady in your awareness is not just a matter of concentration practice. It's the basis for allowing discernment to arise – because you're right here, and when you're right here watching what's happening, you can't help but see. The problem is we're all too often *not* here. Our gaze has been diverted. Our attention has slipped off someplace else.

So keep zeroing in on the breath, zeroing in on the breath. Don't let anything else pull your attention away.