

The Breathing Game

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When we meditate, we're not just sitting here waiting for some big experience to come along. We're working on a skill. The skill is to make us more mindful, more alert, more concentrated and discerning. As with any skill, it's important, one, that you start out with something fairly simple and, two, that you treat it like a game. If you get too serious and too emotional about it from the very beginning, you tie yourself up in knots.

So treat the whole thing with good humor. The simple thing we start out with is the breath. Can you stay with the breath? Focus on any part in the body where you have sensations letting you know that now the breath is coming in; now, the breath is going out. See if you can keep in touch with those sensations all the way through the in-breath, all the way through the out-, and in the gaps in between. See how long you can do this. And allow the breath to be comfortable. If you make it too tight, too constricted—which you're probably going to do—just catch yourself and allow things to relax. If you wander off, come back to the breath again—as I say, with a sense of good humor. After all, you don't want to be on bad terms with your breath.

If you want, you can use a meditation word to go along with the breathing to help keep you focused. A traditional one is *buddho*. It's the title of the Buddha after he gained his awakening. The word means "awake." Use *bud-* with the in-breath, *dho* with the out-. *Buddho*, *buddho*. No matter how many times you fall off the breath, just pick yourself up, dust yourself off, and get back on until you find you can stay with the breath sensation fairly consistently. Then you can drop the word *buddho* and just be with the breathing.

In the course of doing this, you develop some important qualities of mind. One is mindfulness, the ability to keep something in mind. The second is alertness, the ability to watch your actions and see their results. And the third is persistence: You just stick with it. One of the secrets of persistence is not that you just grit your teeth and push, push, push on through, but that you learn how to make a game of it. See how long you can stay with the breath, and then next time, after you've fallen off, see if you can stay longer. Don't let yourself get frustrated or upset.

The reason we need the qualities of alertness, mindfulness, and persistence is because we have to learn how to see through the mind's illusions: the way it deludes itself. There are two big issues about which we're deluded. One is our

intentions—we very rarely know our own intentions, why we do something—and two, we're not very clear on the results of our actions. We don't see the connection between an intention and the result of the action based *on* the intention. These are things that we tend to hide from ourselves.

Psychologists have discovered this. It's very easy for the mind to delude itself. The Buddha made a comparison between consciousness and a magic show, and psychologists have been studying magic to see exactly how a magician tricks his audience. They've discovered that our awareness of what's going on right in front of our eyes is very sketchy. So many little bits of sensory input are coming in at any one time that we've learned how to block out things, the things that we think are unimportant, to focus on what we think is important. And our vision of what's going on in the present moment is very much like a cartoon: just a few highlights. This is one of the reasons why cartoons are so effective. They speak right to the way the mind perceives things. Magicians exploit this: They get us to draw one cartoon, while they do their tricks in the areas from which they deflect our attention.

But the problem is that we base our intentions on our cartoons, and then we act on our intentions, thinking they're going to make us happy. Yet so many times, we end up causing suffering for ourselves and for other people.

This is the other thing psychologists have discovered, that we have a very poor idea of what's going to make us happy. We've done things in the past, they've never really made us happy, and yet we keep doing them again and again and again, hoping that maybe this time around, something will click. I think it was Einstein who said that that's the definition of insanity: doing the same thing over and over again and hoping to get different results.

So, if you look very carefully at your perception of reality, you find that the cartoon has big blank spaces where your intentions are, and also big blank spaces where the connection between your intention and the happiness or the pain that results from your intention *should* be. But they're just missing, and this is what meditation allows us to fill in. If you can learn how to make your awareness more and more consistent, more and more steady, you begin to see these connections. You see your intentions, you see yourself acting on the intentions, and you see what results from your action, whether the result is happiness or not. If it's not, you can try to figure out other ways of acting.

A very simple lesson here is with the breath. What's the most comfortable way to breathe? That can be your next game after you've learned how to stay with the breath for a while. Experiment with different rhythms of breathing: long in or long out; short in, short out; long in, short out; short in, long out. See what that

does. Does it feel good? If so, take whichever rhythm feels good and stick with it. Then you can try deep and shallow.

What's really a lot of fun is conceiving of the breath in a different way: not the air coming in and out of the lungs, but just the general feeling of energy in the body. Some types of energy in the body flow; some types stay still, like a hum in the background. How are those related to the in-and-out breath? That's something else you can explore. As you get more and more absorbed in this, you begin to see the connection between your intention and how you focus on the breath—and the sense of ease or *dis*-ease that results.

The Buddha's traditional steps in meditation talk about how, after you've been with a short breath or the long breath, you begin to be aware of the whole body as you breathe in, the whole body as you breathe out. Now, that works best if the breath is comfortable. At the same time, you're developing a new kind of awareness. The awareness that the magicians find so easy to delude is pretty much one-pointed. In other words, you focus on one thing, and they can do all kinds of things in the periphery of your vision, and you don't notice them. The same is true in your mind. You can focus on one or two things that are happening in the mind, and all kinds of other things are happening in the periphery of your vision—your mental vision—yet you're barely conscious of them.

What you have to develop is the mental version that trackers and wilderness instructors call "scatter vision." As you go through the forest, you want to have your vision as broad as possible to notice even the slightest little things on the periphery of your vision. We try to do the same with the breath. Have a sense of the energy all around the body. You're sitting here in the midst of that all-around energy. Try to keep your awareness as all-around as possible, too. As you do that, you begin to pick up things you didn't see before. At the same time, your focus gets a lot more solid because it's not dependent on staying with one little point. If your focus is too one-pointed, the slightest little thing can knock you off that point, and that destroys your concentration. But if your focus is broad, things can come into the range of your focus, and they don't knock you off.

In this way, you're less likely to get sucked into the little thought worlds that the mind keeps creating for itself, some of which come in and consume your awareness. Especially if they have strong emotional connotations, they seem to take over your whole body. You feel that you can't stand it; you've got to get them out of your system. Well, what usually happens when you get things out of your system that way is that you don't really get them out; you just create more bad habits. But if you have a range of awareness that can encompass those thoughts and emotions, you realize they don't inhabit the whole body. You put yourself in a

position where you can observe them. That's how the meditation leads to discernment.

It's like two different ways of watching a movie or watching TV. One way is getting involved in the story. It's almost as if you're up there on the screen with the people. But if you stay in your body and have a very strong sense of yourself sitting there in the seat while you're watching, it's a different experience. You're more detached, more likely to see little things you missed before, less likely to get deluded. You begin to see through the mind's subterfuges: the way it lies to itself about its intentions and the way it lies to itself about the results of its actions.

This is where the mind develops skill. You become a better judge of what intentions to act on because you've seen what intentions have worked in the past to actually create a sense of well-being, to create the results that you, really deep down inside, would like to see.

This, in basic terms, is the skill you're working on: the skill not to get sucked in to the way the mind lies to itself. When you don't get sucked in, then you become a lot more skillful in creating happiness for yourself and happiness for the people around you.

This magic show that the mind plays: It wouldn't be so bad if people weren't really suffering from it. The problem is that the suffering is real. The good news, of course, is that you can unlearn your habits of creating suffering by being more mindful, by being more alert in a more all-around way.

So make sure you get the basics down. Stay with the breath. Keep the breath comfortable. If you fall off, get back with the breath. Do it all with a sense of good humor, because it's a skill that requires you stick with it for the long haul. And don't be discouraged by how much effort it takes, because the results, when they come, are more than worth the effort.