

Solidly Established

August 22, 2005

When you start out meditating, you want to know *how* to meditate and *why* you're meditating. The how is pretty simple. Place your hands in your lap, your right hand on top of your left. Sit relatively straight. Close your eyes. And focus on your breath. Wherever in the body you have a sensation that lets you know that now the breath is coming in, now the breath is going out, focus on that part of the body. It can be around the nose. It can be in the rise and fall of the chest or the abdomen. Choose a spot where you feel comfortable, and let the breath be comfortable as well. Try not to force it too much. Let it come in and go out at a rhythm that feels good.

You might want to start out with a couple of good, long, deep in-and-out breaths. Then let the breath find a rhythm that feels right. Then do the same for the next breath and the next. That's why what may be simple is not necessarily easy. It's sticking with it that's going to make all the difference. We've all noticed our breath off and on throughout our life, but here's a chance to see what happens when you just focus on the breath to the exclusion of everything else. Other thoughts may come into the mind, but you have to learn how to pay them no attention. Think of them as people passing by when you have work to do. You don't have to identify with the thought, thinking that it's your thought or something you have to look into. What you're here to do right now is to stay with the breath.

If you have trouble staying with it, you might want to use a meditation word to go along with it. You might think *in* with the in-breath, and *out* with the out. A traditional meditation word is *buddho*, which means awake. It's the title the Buddha earned through his awakening: *bud* with the in-breath, *dho* with the out. If you wander off, bring the mind back to the breath. If you wander off again, bring it back again. Go off 10 times, bring it back 10 times. Go off hundred times, bring it back a hundred times. Don't get discouraged.

You're developing three qualities of mind. The first is mindfulness, the ability keep something in mind—in this case, keeping the breath in mind. The next one is alertness, watching what you're doing and watching the results of what you're doing. In other words, you're alert to the breath and being alert to whether you're staying with the breath or not. If you catch yourself wandering off, you bring the mind right back. While you're with the breath, you try to pay careful attention to how the breathing feels. Think of the breath as coming in and out the whole body,

so that you don't tense up any of the different parts of the body. Relax your hands, relax your feet, and then just relax all the way up the arms, all the way up the legs, all the way through the body, while you keep your posture straight.

You'll find that if there's a lot of tension in the body, you're not going to want to stay in the present moment. It's uncomfortable, and the mind tends to run away from anything uncomfortable. So you think of the breath coming in and out of the whole body; allow the whole body to relax with the breath.

The third quality we develop is persistence. In other words, you really stick with it. This means that as soon as you catch the mind wandering off, you bring it right back. You don't tell yourself, "Hey, you've got a whole hour. You can think about all kinds of things," and then let the mind wander off as it likes. That doesn't accomplish anything at all. It doesn't make any real difference in the mind.

So as soon as you catch yourself wandering off, you come right back. While you're with the breath, you try to be as sensitive as possible to how it feels. You keep on adjusting the rate of breathing, even if there's just a little bit of discomfort attached to the breath, whether you're tensing up as you breathe in or holding on to tension as you breathe out. Try to be sensitive to that and then let the tension go.

Those are the three qualities we're trying to develop: mindfulness, alertness, and persistence. The reason we're developing them has to do with that fifth of the contemplations we chanted just now: "I'm the owner of my actions, heir to my actions." In other words, each of us shapes his or her life through what we think, what we do, what we say. This is the big power in our lives. So it only makes sense that you want to do things skillfully. You want to think, act, and speak in ways that actually bring about happiness rather than bringing about pain and suffering.

Yet you look at the way people behave throughout the world, and there's a lot of pain and suffering being produced. Fortunately, we're not doomed to suffer forever. We have this ability, which is to learn. We can see that we make a mistake when we do something that causes suffering, and we can stop. This requires these three qualities: mindfulness, alertness, and persistence.

In other words, you try to be alert to what you're doing and alert to the results of what you're doing. If you see that there's a way of acting or thinking or speaking that causes stress and suffering, you can decide not to do that. Mindfulness is required so that you can remember that fact, and then apply it the next time you make a decision to think or act or speak. Mindfulness is also the quality that allows you, one, to see the connections between what you do and the results of what you do. Sometimes the results are immediate and sometimes they

take place over time. If you forgot what you did, it's hard to make the connection. Once you notice the connection, then mindfulness is useful so that you can remember it the next time you decide to think or act or speak in the same way.

These are all really basic mental skills: the ability to keep something in mind, the ability to watch what you're doing, and then the ability to stick with something that you know is going to help you. Because they're so basic, we tend to overlook them. Yet anything you do in life requires these mental qualities. So here's an opportunity to develop them. It's like realizing that you've got a job to do and yet you're too weak to do it. So you go down to the gym and you exercise, to build up your strength. Meditation is just that: It's exercise for building up strength of mind, the strength of your mindfulness, your strength of your alertness, and the strength of your persistence.

When you develop these qualities, they bring the mind to a state that's centered and concentrated. A sense of peace comes with them. As you find yourself able to stay with the breath for longer and longer periods of time, the mind doesn't have to keep jumping around the way it normally does. It can begin to really settle into the present moment with a sense of belonging here.

Most of us are strangers to the present moment. We live more in the past. We live more in the future. We hardly visit the present moment at all. It's like a little kid who comes home and grabs a sandwich and runs out. We come into the present for little bit and then run away. As a result, we don't know a thing about our minds, because all the decisions about what we're going to do and say and think are made here in the present moment. And because we don't stay here, we don't understand what's going on.

This leaves us defenseless. When things like aging, illness, and death come—as they come to everybody—they're going to come right here in the present moment. If we haven't already established ourselves here, they're going to take over. The mind will feel threatened. It'll react in all kinds of thoughtless and mindless ways, creating a lot of unnecessary suffering around these events. But if you're established here, you know which part of the mind here is affected by aging, illness, and death, but you also begin to discover that there's a part of the mind that's *not* affected by them, that can maintain a sense of solidity, strength, and well-being no matter what happens. This is one of the skills you can develop through the meditation: finding that part of the mind, staying there, tapping into it whenever you need it.

It all starts from this very simple practice of staying with the breath, trying to let the breath be comfortable, so that you enjoy staying here, and then being very

alert to catch the mind when it wanders off and bring it right back. It's a simple exercise, but it develops some very essential skills of the mind.

So you've got a whole hour to practice. Try to make the most of it.