

Determined to Stay with the Breath

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When you meditate, you're making up your mind that you're going to focus on one topic. And that phrase "making up your mind" means that you're going to have to deal with all the different contrary impulses there may be in the mind.

When you tell yourself that you're going to focus on the breath for the next hour, what percentage of the mind believes you? Don't let yourself be discouraged by the fact that it may not be a hundred percent.

You have some impulses that are on your side to stay with the breath, and other impulses that are on your side *not* to stay with the breath. It's all *you* in there. All those different voices in there have been you at one point or another. It's simply a matter of deciding that this time around you're really going to side with the you who wants to stay here.

Don't be surprised if something else will come along and push you off the breath or lead you astray, but don't just take it lying down. Get up and focus on the breath again. Know that you're going to have some contrary impulses, but they don't have to have the upper hand. You just keep coming back, coming back, coming back.

Each time you come back, try to reward yourself with a really nice breath. And try to figure out ways that make it interesting to stay here. Explore the different ways that the breathing feels in the body. When you breathe in, which parts of the body are participating in the breath process? Which parts are actually doing the work? Which ones are getting some nourishment? And which parts don't seem to be having any role at all? Can you get everybody involved?

Think of the breath not just as the air coming in and out of the lungs but also as the flow of energy in the body. You know that if the energy flows throughout the body, every part of the body is going to benefit. All the different organs are going to benefit. The mind, when it stays with the energized body like this, is more inclined to stay here. When it feels good in your hands, feels good in your feet, feels good in your arms and legs, in all the different parts of your torso, all the different parts of your head, then it's nicer to stay here. It's more interesting.

There develops a sense of ease. If you allow that ease to have some space, it becomes a sense of fullness, refreshment. The potential is here. But we're too interested in other things—or at least some members of the committee are interested in other things. They want to go off someplace else. They say, "Well that's nice. You can stay with your breath a little bit. But then let's do something

else.”

It’s like the person who gives up alcohol for a while and says, “Well, I’ve proven to myself now that I can give up alcohol. Let’s go back and start drinking again.” That’s not a victory of any kind.

You’re here to discover what it’s like to really stay with the breath and to develop all the talents and insights that come with coming back, coming back, coming back to the breath. If there’s a sense of discouragement when you find the mind wandering off, how do you learn how to drop that discouragement and just keep coming back, coming back?

If you find yourself getting complacent when things are nice, how do you deal with that? How do you deal with the breath when it doesn’t seem to want to get comfortable at all? That’s a good time just to stop and watch for a while. Allow the body to do its own thing and see what it does when it does its own thing—or at least when you interfere with it less.

This means that you have to develop a variety of skills. But you have to hold in mind one determination: that this is where you really want to stay.

When the Buddha talks about determination, he mentions four qualities that make up a good determination. The first is discernment. That means understanding that this really is a worthwhile activity—and also understanding what you’re up against. You learn how to develop strategies, tactics for dealing with the various ways the mind likes to play tricks on itself and go wandering off and do something else.

One strategy is to remind yourself that the mind has been wandering for a long, long time. You’ve pretty much seen what it can do as it wanders. Have you ever really given it a chance to see what it does when it stays still? Here’s an opportunity to find out. And what do you need to do to stay still? As I said, one of the strategies is to make the breath interesting or to make yourself interested in the breath. The breath is actually already an interesting aspect of your body, of your experience. But it’s one that we here in the West tend to overlook.

When you talk to people about the breath energy flowing in the nerves, they look at you quizzically. But if you sit here long enough and watch the breathing, you begin to notice that there really is a sense of flow in the different parts of the body. Some areas seem to flow better than others. When you watch it for a while, you begin to realize that if you allow yourself to pay attention to this and if you think of allowing the breath to move in different parts, you actually can make a difference.

This is an important aspect of the Buddha’s teachings. He has you focus not only on things that you can immediately experience but also on things you have

some control over, things you can change. We're not here just to watch, watch, watch and be equanimous about whatever comes up. That helps in a few cases, but there are other times when you have to be more proactive—and realize that you do have a role in shaping your present experience. So learn how to make the most of that role.

That's discernment, the first part of your determination to stay here. You're making up your mind that this is really what you want, this is a good goal. If a part of the mind questions that, learn how to give reasons for why you want the mind to be trained. Also know what obstacles you're up against and learn how to develop techniques for dealing with them. That's all discernment.

The next quality is truth. Once you've made up your mind to stay here, you really do it, you stick with it, you don't change your mind ten minutes into the meditation and decide that this might be a good time to plan your activities for the next week. You've got lots of other times when you can do that. This is a good time for meditating. Sitting with a group of people, we're meditating here in the cool of the evening. We're out in the wilds: You can hear the coyotes off in the distance. It's a good time to meditate.

And even when it's not such a good time to meditate, you want to learn how to stay true to your determination that you really do want to train the mind. Even when it's hot and you're alone, you still want to maintain the truth of that determination.

The Buddha has a passage where he talks about the reasons why people get lazy: "It's too hot," "It's too early," "It's too late," "It's too cold." There's no reason why heat should be an obstacle to getting your mind focused. There's no reason why cold should be, or earliness or lateness. When there's noise outside, think of the noise just going right through you without its disturbing you or without your disturbing it.

Ajaan Chah has that nice comment. He says it's not so much the noise that's disturbing us. We're disturbing the noise. In other words, we're complaining about it. The noise is just doing its own thing. It's not there with any intention to harm us. It registers at the ears, and that's it. We're the one who are complaining, making an issue out of it, putting up resistance.

You have to remember that the mind that's not trained suffers a lot more than a person sitting here trying to train the mind, even when it's hot or when it's cold. When the circumstances are nice or not nice, you don't want to make them an obstacle to your practice. After all, it is the mind that we're training here. And the mind in and of itself is neither hot or cold. Hot and cold are an affair of the body.

And there's often a lot that you can be aware of that has nothing to do with the

aspects of your surroundings that are not conducive. Your vision, for example, doesn't register heat, your ears don't register heat, and the breath is not an affair of heat, either. It's just energy moving.

So this is one of the ways that you build your endurance, your ability to stay true to this: by focusing on the things that are actually conducive to the practice, or at the very least neutral. If you start getting worked up about the things that are not conducive, you suddenly find yourself making all sorts of excuses for why you can't meditate right now. The excuses are the real problem. So you remind yourself: You're going to be true to your determination.

This is where it's good to have virtue as an aspect of the practice. It teaches you to make a promise to yourself that you're not going to get involved in killing or stealing or illicit sex or lying or drugs or whatever. That forces you to learn the skills that are required to stick with that determination, to stay with it. And then you learn how to apply those skills to the meditation as well.

Think of the meditation as a promise you make to yourself, in the same way as you take the precepts as a promise to yourself. Have a sense of honor about doing this. You don't make promises and then just abandon them at the slightest problem.

The third quality is generosity, relinquishment, learning how to give things up. While you're sitting here meditating, there are a lot of things you can't do. Remind yourself that you're making a trade. A lot of the other things you could be doing right now really don't amount to much. And here you're training the mind: *the* most important part of your life.

So if sensual fantasies come in, you just drop them. Fantasies of ill will come up, you drop them. Anything unskillful comes up in the mind, you just drop it. You say, "I'm going to make a trade. I don't need the pleasure that comes from feeding off of those kinds of mind states."

Because there is a pleasure even in ill will, there's a pleasure in worry, even. Part of the mind feels justified saying, "Ah, I've got something really worrisome right here and I'll just worry it to death and feel that I'm virtuous for doing that."

Remind yourself: You've got better pleasures, or there's a potential for a better pleasure in getting the mind to settle down. Most of us don't like the either/or. We want to have our cake and eat it too. But part of becoming a mature meditator lies in realizing that there are certain things you'll have to give up. But the trade is worth it.

The fourth determination is calm: maintaining your serenity as you work with the mind. You don't let yourself get worked up; you don't let yourself get exasperated. You have the ability to just keep coming back, coming back, coming

back.

This is related to two other qualities: patience and equanimity. Equanimity is when you're able to just watch what's happening and not react. Patience is your ability to endure. If something comes up, and you say, "I can't stand this any longer," ask yourself, "Is this killing you?" Well, no.

The things the Buddha has you endure are basically physical pain, uncomfortable situations, and unkind words. You have to remind yourself that all these things are a normal part of human life. If you let yourself get worked up by them, other people will have control over you. They can make things painful for you, they can say things that'll hurt your feelings, and they'll have you on a string.

Whereas if you can put up with difficult situations, put up with painful words, people can't control you. You're more independent. So think of this ability to develop your endurance as your training in independence. There's a type of freedom that comes when you can put up with these things.

That way, you can maintain your calm when the situation is comfortable and you can maintain your calm when it's not comfortable—and maintaining your calm, you're able to see things a lot more clearly.

As the Buddha said to Rahula, "Try to make your mind like earth. People throw disgusting things on the earth, and the earth doesn't shrink away. Make your mind like water. When people use water to wash away disgusting things, the water doesn't shrink away. Make your mind like fire. Fire can burn up trash, but the fire doesn't seem to be disgusted by it. Make your mind like wind. The wind blows trash around, but the wind doesn't get disgusted by the trash."

Now, he's not saying just to put up with whatever comes along and don't do anything in response. Because the next step in training Rahula was to get him to engage with the breath, and there are many things you do with the breath in the Buddha's instructions. You learn how to breathe in a way that allows you to be aware of the whole body. You calm the effect of the breath on the body. You learn how to breathe in ways that foster rapture and pleasure, that can gladden or steady the mind. There are lots of things you've got to do. But in order to do them well, you have to be able to observe. And this is what calm and equanimity are for: learning how to observe cause and effect so that you can figure them out, in the same way that a hunter really knows the animals he's hunting. I've only known one real hunter in my life—one who trapped animals for food and not for sport—and I was amazed at how much he knew about rabbit psychology and squirrel psychology and the other kind of animals he was hunting. That was because he'd watched, he'd observed.

And it's the same thing with the mind. You're trying to figure out your

defilements, so you have to learn how to watch them from a calm point of view. Only then can you understand how to get around them. You're not trying to obliterate them with your anger or with your pride or with any other unskillful emotion. You're trying to deal skillfully with your unskillful mind states. That means understanding where they're coming from, understanding how they arise, what causes their arising, so that you can cut things there at the cause. All too often we try to cut things off at the effect.

Like those wealthy people from Bangkok I heard about years back: They went to visit a school out in rural Thailand and they were really upset at the poverty. But what upset them about the poverty was seeing these poor kids lined up, wearing dirty clothes. So they decided to get nice clean clothes for the kids so they wouldn't have to look at the kids' poverty.

That's dealing with the effect. The kids were still poor and they still didn't have enough to eat and were still lacking a lot of other things. But the people who brought the clothes felt a lot better now that they didn't have to see the kids' poverty. That's dealing with the effect, not with the cause.

All too often when we're trying to deal with the defilements of the mind, we're dealing with the effects and not digging a little bit deeper to see the real cause. To see the cause, you have to develop a really calm state of mind, which is why calm is such an important part of determination. It allows you to take the discernment that you used at the beginning and sharpen it.

All four of these qualities—the discernment, the truth, the relinquishment, and the calm—strengthen one another. That way, when you make up your mind you're going to do something really worthwhile, you accomplish it. Your life is not littered with good intentions that never get fulfilled. Instead, you can see, "I made up my mind to do x , and it was done. I made up my mind to do y , realizing it was a good thing, and it was done." That's the kind of life that's really worth living. And it starts right here as you train the mind.