

Lean into the Present

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It's a commonplace that you'll find in a lot of books of wise sayings, that people spend so much time living in the future that they never really live in the present. And just because it's a commonplace doesn't mean it's not true. The question is, how do you live in the present? How do you best live in the present? It's possible just to be right here, but just being here is not enough—you have to really *know* right here. That means taking the mind that sometimes leans into the future, sometimes leans into the past, and try to lean into the present moment instead.

Remind yourself that if anything of value is going to be found in the meditation it's going to be found here. Even though the present moment may not be all that good, you can't let that get in the way. In fact, that's a lot of what it means to dig down into the present moment: getting past the things that are not good, and finding what potentials you have there that really are worthwhile.

Think of the breath—who would have thought that you could find awakening by staying with the breath? But it is possible. The Buddha did it, many other members of the noble Sangha in the past have done it, and what's the difference between your breath and their breath? It's the same thing—the difference is in the attention they paid to the breath itself, and the attention they paid to questions around the breath. So pay attention to the breath.

How's it going right now? How could it be changed for the better? When we talk about being in the present moment, it doesn't mean just sitting with whatever. The present moment is full of potentials—and the mind is very good at taking those potentials and turning them into something else.

The Buddha talks about the aggregates as all being shaped by fabrication. We fabricate the sense of the body for the sake of having a sense of the body because we want to do something with a body. We fabricate feelings because we want feelings. The same with perceptions, thought fabrications, consciousness: We do this for the sake of something, but all too often we're not really clear about what the "for the sake" is. All we know is that we're leaning in that direction.

What the Buddha's telling us is to be here with the breath in order to fabricate feelings around the breath, fabricate your perceptions around the breath for the sake of settling in and really get to know the breath—to see what potentials its got.

This, too, is something we fabricate. In-and-out breathing is bodily fabrication, and the perceptions you apply to it are mental fabrication. The way you talk about it is verbal

fabrication. You're doing these things all the time with other topics. The Buddha's simply saying to bring them all together right here.

If the body's not feeling very good right now, find some spot that you can lay claim to where it's okay. If it were painful everywhere, as Ajaan Lee pointed out, you'd die. It's simply a matter of learning how to recognize where there's something potentially good. It may not be all that outstanding to begin with. It may seem pretty ordinary, but sometimes very ordinary things can have an extraordinary side.

Years back I happened to be in Japan, and on the TV they had a documentary about a living national treasure, an artist. I forget exactly what the art was: It had to do with cutting things out of paper. He'd doodle little lines here, little lines there, and it didn't look like much; it looked like he was just a little kid fooling around. But then he started cutting, and by the time he was done, he had something that was pretty amazing.

That's what artists do. They take very ordinary materials and can make amazing things out of them. Well, this is what meditators should be able to do, too. You can take your breath and make something amazing out of it: a place where you can stay in abundant comfort, a place where the mind can settle down and really get to know itself.

The vast majority of people go through life without really knowing their own minds. You ask people after they've done something, "Why did you do that?" And they have to stop and think for a bit. All too often, it's simply on impulse, and the impulse gets quickly forgotten. Yet this is how their lives are shaped.

So here we have this opportunity to get to see the mind in action by anchoring it in the breath. This is the place to be, because the impulses happen in the present moment, the intentions happen in the present moment. Everything happens in the present moment. It's simply a question of: Are *we* here in the present moment? Or are we leaning someplace else? Let's try to lean back into the present, and be satisfied trying to figure this out.

Remember, we're here not simply for the sake of ease. The ease helps, but we're here for the sake of seeing how the mind creates suffering out of things it doesn't have to suffer over. There can be pain in the body, but the mind doesn't have to suffer from the pain. There can be crazy thoughts going through the mind, but the mind doesn't have to suffer from them. You can find a part of your awareness that can stand apart. If it gets impatient wanting to solve the problem right now, remember, the present moment is a strange thing. It stretches on, and on, and on. This is the present, now this is the present, now this is the present. We keep having present moments.

So if you don't understand everything right now, well, keep looking right here, right now. Don't go casting off into the past or future. Otherwise, you're like that story they tell in the Philippines of the man who's taking a boat from one island to the next. He'd dropped

something overboard in the middle of the voyage, so he waited until he got to the port, and then started looking overboard for what he had dropped. People asked him, “Why are you looking here, when you dropped it over there?” He said, “Well, here the light is better. It’s easier to see.”

We keep thinking that someplace else, some other time we’ll be able to see things, and we get impatient for that other time. We don’t really see what’s going on right now. You want to look at the breath right now because as you watch the breath, it’s not just the breath. You’re watching the mind as well.

Even though the breath can be very interesting—it can do lots of different things in the body—it’s not nearly as interesting as the mind. When you get the hang of how to watch the mind so that you’re not fooled by it, that’s when the meditation gets really interesting and satisfying. You see how you’ve been fooling yourself, but you’re not fooled anymore. Now, in some cases, that might sound like you’ve had it with your mind, but that’s not the case. You realize there is the part of the mind that can figure things out, and you learn how to side with that.

That’s the side that gets released. So you want to learn how to side with that side of the mind, the side that’s willing to watch and ask questions: Where is the craving right now? Where is the clinging right now? If you’re not sure, ask yourself: Where is the mind suffering right now? Where is the location of that suffering?

There’s that passage where the Buddha asks, “The things you’ve never seen before: Do you have any desire there?” You might say, “Well, yes, there are lots of things I haven’t seen that I would like to see,” but that’s not what he’s saying. In your particular case the desire is not at the sight. The desire’s at your perception, your thought *about* the sight.

It’s the same as when we’re attracted to a person. Sometimes we’re not so much attracted to the actual person as we are to our perceptions around the person—which is a setup for a lot of suffering. We find that the person, after all, is not the same thing as those perceptions.

So we want to see: Where in the mind right now is the craving focused? Where is the suffering located? You’ve got to stay with the breath to give yourself a good place to stand, to watch, and ask these questions. But be confident that everything you need to know is right here. And if one line of questioning doesn’t get to the answer, you might try another one, but just keep at it, keep at it, keep at it. Try to gain some energy from the breath and some confidence from the fact that other people have done this, and they all started out as ordinary human beings. If they can do it, so can you.

The more you can take an interest in your own mind and the workings of your mind, the more you’ll be on course. Sometimes we sit and meditate, and other things come up. Visions can come, intuitions can come, but you have to ask yourself: Are these relevant to the working

of my mind right now? How are my perceptions dealing with this? How are my thought fabrications dealing with this? Where is my clinging and craving around this? If the intuitions give you insight into those questions okay, then they're useful. If they're intuitions of another sort, just put them aside. Because this is where the real work is done.

This is the Buddha's real genius: to realize that this is the best use of your powers of concentration, this is the best use of your time. Once you figure out how the mind creates unnecessary suffering for itself, you find that there's a lot more that you're going to discover as well—things of even greater value. So try to lean into the present moment, because that's where the action is.