

The How & the Why

Thanissaro Bhikkhu

November 14, 1996

Two important questions you have to answer about meditation are “how?” and “why?”—how to do it and why you are doing it—because meditation is not just a technique. There’s a context for the practice, and only when you see the practice in context can you really understand what you’re doing and get the most out of it.

The “how” is pretty simple. With breath meditation, sit straight, hands in your lap, right hand on top of your left hand, your legs crossed, right leg on top of the left leg, your eyes closed. That’s getting your body into position. Getting your mind into position means focusing it in on the present moment. Think about the breath and then notice how the breath feels as it comes in, how it feels as it goes out. Be aware of the breathing. That means you have two qualities at work: the thinking or mindfulness, which reminds you where to stay; and the alertness, which tells you what’s happening with the breath. Those are two of the qualities you want.

The third quality is what the Buddha called *atappa*, or ardency, which means you really put an effort into it. You really focus on what you’re doing. You’re not just playing around. You give it your whole attention. You try to be ardently mindful and ardently alert.

Ardently mindful means that you try to keep your mindfulness as continuous as possible, without any gaps. If you find that your mind has slipped off the breath, you bring it right back. You don’t let it dawdle here or sniff at the flowers there. You’ve got work to do and you want to get it done as quickly, as thoroughly, as possible. You have to maintain that kind of attitude. As the Buddha said, it’s like realizing that your head is on fire. You put it out as fast as possible. The issues we’re dealing with are serious issues, urgent issues: aging, illness, and death. They’re like fires burning away inside us. So you have to maintain that sense of ardency because you never know when these fires are going to flare up. You want to be as prepared as possible, as quickly as possible. So when the mind wanders off, be ardent in bringing it back.

Ardently alert means that when the mind is staying with the breath, you try to be as sensitive as possible in adjusting it to make it feel good, and in monitoring the results of your efforts. Try long breathing to see how it feels. Try short breathing, heavy breathing, light breathing, deep, shallow. The more refined you can make your awareness, the better the meditation goes because you can make the breath more and more refined, a more and more comfortable place for the mind to stay. Then you can let that sense of comfort spread throughout the body. Think of the breath not simply as the air coming in and out the lungs, but as the

flow of energy throughout the whole body. The more refined your awareness, the more sensitive you can be to that flow. The more sensitive you are, the more refined the breath becomes, the more gratifying, the more absorbing it becomes as a place to stay.

This is the basic trick in getting the mind to settle down in the present moment—you've got to give it something that it likes to stay with. If it's here against its will, it's going to be like a balloon you push under the water. As long as your hand has a good grasp on the balloon, it's not going to pop up, but as soon as you slip a little bit, the balloon pops up out of the water. If the mind is forced to stay on an object that it really finds unpleasant, it's not going to stay. As soon as your mindfulness slips just a little bit, it's gone.

Or you can compare it to parents raising a child. If the parents are constantly beating the child, the child is going to run away from home as soon as it finds the chance. Even if they lock the windows and doors, it's going to look for an opening. As soon as they turn their backs, it's gone. But if the parents are kind to the child—give it good things to play with, interesting things to do at home, lots of warmth and love—the child will want to stay home even if the windows and doors are left wide open.

So it is with the mind. Be friendly with it. Give it something good to stay with in the present moment—like comfortable breathing. Maybe you can't make the whole body comfortable, but make at least part of the body comfortable and stay with that part. As for the pains, let them be in the other part. They have every right to be there, so make an arrangement with them. They stay in one part, you stay in another. But the essential point is that you have a place where the mind feels stable, secure, and comfortable in the present moment. These are the beginning steps in meditation.

This kind of meditation can be used for all sorts of purposes, but the Buddha realized that the most important purpose is to get the mind out of the whole cycle of aging, illness, and death. And when you think about it, there's nothing more important than that. That's the big problem in life and yet society tends to slough off the problems of aging, illness, and death, tends to push them off to the side because other things seem more pressing. Making a lot of money is more important. Having fulfilling relationships is more important. Whatever. And the big issues in life—the fact that you're headed for the sufferings and indignities that come with an aging, ill, or dying body—get pushed off, pushed out of the way. "Not yet, not yet, maybe some other time." And of course when that other time does arrive and these things come barging in, they won't accept your "not yet," won't be pushed out anymore. If you haven't prepared yourself for them, you'll really be up the creek, at a total loss.

So these are the most important things you need to prepare for. A lot of other things in life are uncertain, but a couple of things are certain. Aging comes. Illness comes. Death is going to come for sure. So when you know something is going to come for sure, you have to prepare for it. And when you realize that this is the most important issue in life, you have to look at the way you live your life.

Meditation—the practice of the Buddha’s teachings—is not just a question of sitting with your eyes closed every now and then. It’s about how you order your priorities. As the Buddha said, when you see there’s a greater level of happiness that can be found by sacrificing lesser forms of happiness, you sacrifice the lesser ones. Look at your life and the things you hold onto, the little places where the mind finds its pleasure but doesn’t gain any real fulfillment: Are those the things you really want to hold onto? Are you going to let them be the factors governing your life?

And then you can think of larger issues. The chance for a happiness that goes beyond aging, illness, and death: Will that be the first priority in your life?

These are questions we all have to ask within ourselves. The Buddha doesn’t force our answers. He simply sets out what the situation is. He says that there is a possibility for happiness lying beyond the happiness that comes from simply eating and sleeping, looking after the body and having a comfortable time. This possibility is the good news in the Buddha’s teachings, especially since most of the world says, “Well, this is all there is to life, so make the most of it. Satisfy yourself with these immediate pleasures and don’t think about other things. Don’t let yourself get dissatisfied with what you’ve got.” When you think about this attitude, it’s really depressing because all it means is that you grab at what you can before you die. And when you die, you can’t take it with you.

But the Buddha said there’s a form of happiness, there’s a form of knowing in the mind, that goes beyond aging, illness, and death, and that can be attained through human effort if you’re skillful enough. So that’s both good news and a challenge. Are you going to let yourself just live an ordinary life frittering your time away? Or are you going to accept the challenge to devote yourself to more important things, devote yourself to this possibility?

The Buddha was the sort of person who put his life on the line. He didn’t have anyone telling him that this was a possibility, but he thought that the only way life would have any dignity, any honor would be if you could find a happiness that doesn’t age, doesn’t grow ill, doesn’t die. And he ran up against all the things he would have to sacrifice in order to find that happiness. So he made those sacrifices—not because he wanted to sacrifice those things, but because he had to. As a result he was able to find what he was looking for. So the story of his life and his teachings are meant as a challenge for us—how are we going to lead *our* lives?

Here we are sitting together meditating. What are you going to do with a still mind, once it’s become still? If you wanted to, you could simply use concentration practice as a method of relaxation or a way of calming the nerves. However, the Buddha says that there’s more to it than that. When the mind is really still, you can dig deep down into the mind and begin to see all the currents that lie underground within it. You can start sorting them out, understanding what drives the mind. Where is the greed? Where is the anger? Where are the delusions that keep you spinning around? How can you cut through them?

These are the questions, these are the issues that can be tackled in the meditation—as long as you have a sense of their importance, that they’re your real priorities. If you don’t have that sense, you don’t want to touch them because they’re big issues and they snarl at you when you get near. But if you really dig down, you find that they’re just paper tigers. I once saw a meditation manual that contained a drawing of a tiger. The face of a tiger was very realistic—all the details were very scary—but its body was made out of folded paper. And that’s what a lot of issues are in the mind. They come at you, looking really intimidating, but if you face them down they turn into origami.

But in order to face them down you’ve got to have a sense that these are the really important issues in life and you’re willing to give up an awful lot for their sake. You’re willing to give up whatever you have to give up. That’s what makes the difference between a practice that goes someplace, that really knocks down the walls in the mind, and a practice that simply rearranges the furniture in the room.

So when you practice meditation, you realize there is both the “how” and the “why,” and the “why” is really important. Often the “why” gets pushed off to the side. You simply follow this or that technique, and then what you want to do with it is up to you—which is true in a way, but doesn’t take into account the possibilities. When you put the possibilities into the context of the Buddha’s teachings, you see the values that underlie the practice. You see how deep the practice goes, how much it can accomplish, and what an enormous job you’re taking on. It’s enormous, but the results are enormous as well.

And the issues are urgent. Aging, illness, and death can come at any time, and you have to ask yourself, “Are you prepared? Are you ready to die?” Ask yourself in all honesty and if you’re not ready, what’s the problem? What are you still lacking? Where are you still holding on? Why do you want to hold on? When the mind settles down and is still, you can start digging into these issues. And the more you dig, the more you uncover within the mind—layers and layers of things that you didn’t suspect, that have been governing your life since who knows when. You dig them out, you see them for what they are, and you’re free from them. You realize all the stupid things that have been running your life, picked up from who knows where. You can’t blame anyone else. You’re the one who picked them up and you played along with them.

Now, when you realize that nothing is accomplished by playing along—that it’s better not to play along with these things, and you don’t have to—then you can let them go. And they let *you* go. What’s left is total freedom. The Buddha said that it’s so total it can’t even be described by words.

So that’s the possibility the meditation points to, and it’s up to each of us to decide how far we want to go in that direction, how much we do really care for our true happiness, for our own true wellbeing. You would think that everyone would say, “Of course I care for my happiness and true wellbeing.” But if you look at the way people live their lives, you can see that they really don’t put that much energy or thought into the quest for true happiness. People usually see

other people do things in this or that way, so they follow along without looking for themselves, as if true happiness were so unimportant that you could leave it up to other people to make your choices for you. Meditation, though, is a chance to look for yourself at what's really important in life and then do something about it.