

Meditation Prep

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Meditation isn't a lap belt. You can't just squeeze your mind into a single technique and expect the technique to do all of your work for you. You've got to develop the proper attitudes toward meditation, proper attitudes toward your mind. In addition, you've got to develop a range of techniques and learn how to determine which technique to use at which particular time for which particular problem, so that you can use the techniques wisely for their intended purpose. They're not meant to be straitjackets for the mind. They're more means for exploration. As the Buddha once said, he points out the road but it's up to you to follow the road, to see what you learn along the way and to discover where it takes you.

In many cases, the good techniques actually present you with questions more than they provide you with answers. You've got to develop the right frame of mind for taking up the questions and figuring out how to get the right answers, answers that help put an end to suffering. To get an idea of what these attitudes are that you need to bring to the meditation, it's good to look at what the Buddha taught his son, Rahula, prior to teaching him how to focus on the breath.

There are two main sets of instructions. In the first set, the Buddha started his meditation instructions not by telling Rahula to sit and close his eyes, but by telling him to develop the right attitude toward all of his actions: his thoughts, words, and deeds. In other words, Rahula was going to get practice in how to be a meditator by looking at his actions in all situations.

First, the Buddha established the principle of truthfulness. If you're the sort of person who feels no shame at telling a lie, he said, then you have no value as a meditator. You've thrown your value away. If you find it easy to lie to other people, it's going to be easy to lie to yourself. So truthfulness was the first principle, the first attitude the Buddha recommended.

Then, he said, you apply that truthfulness to your thoughts, words, and deeds before you act, and keep reminding yourself to act only on harmless intentions. This develops the qualities of good will and compassion. When an intention comes up and you're thinking about following it through, ask yourself: "Is this going to be harmful?" If you can perceive some potential harm, don't do it. If you don't foresee any harm, you can go ahead and do it. While you're acting, look for the immediate results coming from your action, because actions can bear their results not only in the long distant future but also right here, right now, where you can immediately see them. If you stick your finger in fire, it hurts right now. It's not going to wait to hurt you in some future lifetime. If you swallow hot soup, it'll scald you now, not after you die and are reborn.

So if you see any harm coming from your action, stop doing it. But if you don't see any harm either to yourself or to others, you can continue with it. When the action is done, look at its results over the long term. If you realize that it did cause harm over time, develop an attitude of shame about the action. Now, notice that the Buddha is not saying to be ashamed about yourself; he wants you to feel shame toward the action. In other words, view the action as something

beneath you. That's a healthy use of shame; it's the companion to a healthy sense of pride. Make up your mind that you're not going to repeat the action, and then go talk it over with someone you respect. This develops an attitude of integrity, that you accept responsibility for what you've done, and are open about what you've done. This way you can learn.

So the Buddha doesn't start out by telling Rahula not to make mistakes. He says to try to avoid making mistakes, but if you do make a mistake, this is how you handle it, with honesty, with an attitude of harmlessness or compassion, with a healthy sense of shame, and with integrity. If, on the other hand, you look at your actions and see that they haven't caused any harm, you can take joy in the fact and keep on practicing.

That's how you start meditating in your daily life. Those are the attitudes you want to bring to the meditation: a willingness to look at your intentions and to look at their results. This is going to be really important in the course of your meditation, because there's no other way you'll be able to read your own mind.

Then, at a later time, the Buddha taught Rahula breath meditation. But before he taught him breath meditation, he taught him ten other exercises to prepare him for the breath. The first four exercises deal with the physical elements, looking at the body in terms of its elements, its properties. Earth is solidity; water, liquidity; fire, heat; and wind, motion. He said to Rahula, "Try to make your mind like each of these elements, each of these properties." For example with earth: If you throw disgusting things on earth, earth doesn't react. Now the Buddha is not telling Rahula to be passive or oblivious. He's saying to be grounded, to learn powers of endurance, because as you'll see, the meditations he taught Rahula further on are active kinds of meditation that require a lot of sensitivity. You don't simply sit with whatever's there without making any changes. You are supposed to adjust and change things. But if you want to make the proper changes, you first have to understand where you actually are and what the problem actually is. Then make your changes and watch to see if they actually work.

Now to be able to watch to see things clearly, you have to have powers of endurance, the ability to sit with things and watch them steadily over time. Unpleasant things are bound to come up in the meditation for sure. To comprehend them, after all, is the duty with regard to suffering and stress: You've got to comprehend it. And to comprehend it, there are times when you'll have to really sit with it, to watch it over time, again and again and again. This requires endurance.

Then when you try changing something in the meditation—when you experiment with your breath and your mind in various ways—you've got to sit with things for long periods of time to see if what you did really works. You don't want to be the sort of person who makes a little change, sees a little something that looks promising, and immediately jumps to the conclusion that this is the solution. The result may be short lasting. You may ultimately find yourself back where you began. So you want to see if that's the case, which means you've got to be able to sit with things.

The same principle applies with the other properties. Fire can burn unpleasant things, but it doesn't shrink away from them. Water can be used to wash away unpleasant things, but doesn't get disgusted. Wind blows unpleasant things around, and doesn't show distaste.

So you learn to be grounded. Remind yourself that whatever comes up, you can bear it. I remember once when I was staying with Ajaan Fuang, he told me out of the blue one day to sit up and meditate all night. My immediate reaction was that it wasn't a good day for me to try that. I had been working hard that day, I said, I couldn't do it. He looked at me and said, "Well, is it going to kill you?" "Well, no." "Then you can do it." That's the attitude you've got to have—as with that saying, what doesn't kill you will make you stronger. But in the midst of doing difficult things, you don't just suffer through them. You've got to figure out, "How can I get through this without suffering?" That's where you start learning how to be ingenious. But the important thing is that you remind yourself, okay, you can stand this; whatever's coming up, you're not going to get blown around. That way you can begin to trust yourself as an observer.

Then, to show that the Buddha wasn't teaching Rahula to be passive, the next four meditations are about replacing unskillful attitudes with more skillful ones, essentially the attitudes of the brahma-viharas: goodwill, compassion, empathetic joy, and equanimity—although here the Buddha isn't asking him to develop these thoughts to the limitless extent of brahma-viharas. He's simply telling him to replace various levels of aversion in the mind—irritation, resentment, ill will, or the desire to harm—with more positive emotions. If you notice ill will coming up in the mind, try counteracting it with goodwill. Don't just allow the mind to stay stuck with its ill will. You do what you can to foster an attitude of goodwill to whomever the person may be. If the idea comes up that you'd like to be cruel or harmful to somebody, counteract it with an attitude of compassion, reminding yourself that you're not going to benefit from that person's suffering in any way at all. In fact, when other people are suffering, that's when they tend to do crazy, ill-considered, unskillful things. You've got to have some compassion for people who are engaged in unskillful activities, hoping that they'll learn the good sense to stop. Empathetic joy is the antidote for any feelings of resentment you may feel for somebody else's good fortune. You realize that resentment doesn't do you any good at all. People who are enjoying good fortune must've done something sometime that leads to happiness, so why resent it? Do you want people to resent good fortune when it comes your way? Of course not. As for feelings of equanimity, these are meant to counteract feelings of irritation. You want to be equanimous toward irritating things so that irritation doesn't build up to the point where it makes you do something stupid. In each of these cases, you want to be skilled at giving rise to skillful attitudes when you need them so that you don't just sit there stewing in aversion.

Then the Buddha taught two meditations for counteracting other sorts of unskillful qualities. For lust, he said to try to develop the perception of the foulness of the human body. Now this is not about having an unhealthy negative image of the body; it's actually training in having a healthy negative image of the body. You realize that everybody is in the same boat this way. We're all filled with blood, pus, contents of the stomach, contents of the intestines, all kinds of stuff you wouldn't like to have on the floor here in the morning when we're getting the meal ready. This is a useful antidote. When feelings of lust come up and you think about what lies under the skin, it's hard to maintain sexual desire.

So again, the Buddha is not teaching Rahula to be passive, or simply to accept whatever's coming up. He's telling him how to counteract unskillful attitudes and replace them with skillful ones.

In the final preparation, before teaching Rahula breath meditation, the Buddha taught him something that's usually considered to be a very advanced teaching. He said, "Try to develop the perception of inconstancy, to counteract the conceit, 'I am.'" Now notice: The Buddha is putting this right at the beginning. One of the reasons for this is that when skillful and unskillful things come up in the mind, if you immediately brand yourself as "I'm the sort of person who's always skillful," or "I'm the sort of person who's always unskillful," that's going to get in the way of actually seeing which actions in the mind are having a helpful impact and which ones are not. If, when something that looks unskillful comes up, and you immediately react to it, "My gosh, I'm a really bad meditator, I'm miserable, look at this, this horrible thought, I shouldn't be thinking this": You either feel self-hatred or you start going into denial, pretending that it didn't actually happen. Neither reaction helps develop any insight at all. If you engage in denial, you can't see what you're doing, can't see whether the intention was actually skillful or not, and can't see the results of the action. And you certainly can't counteract denial if you don't admit that it's there. Or if you build the other kind of "I am" around the unskillful thought, that "I'm miserable," that really shoots you down, saps your ability to counteract the thought.

This is the problem with "I am": It starts getting to issues of innate nature. If you have a bad innate nature, you can't change it. If you have a good innate nature, then when something that looks skillful arises in the mind, you immediately read it as a sign of your innate goodness. You start getting complacent and careless, and you don't really see whether there's anything unskillful lurking under the surface. Where does this particular intention really lead? What needs to be done with it? Is it really as good as it seems at first glance? If you decide that it's part of your innate Buddha nature, you get complacent. So again, you miss out on things, don't really see things as they're happening, because the "I am" gets in the way.

It's interesting: The Pali word for "conceit"—*mana*—doesn't mean only a sense that you're better than other people. If you say, "I'm worse than other people," or "I'm equal to other people," that's conceit as well, because you're still building the "I am" around things. There are several ways to get around this. The first is the Buddha's advice to Rahula: Whatever comes up is inconstant. It doesn't last, so it's not enough to build an identity around. Another way around the "I am" is that, whatever comes up in the mind, you remind yourself that this happens to everybody. Remind yourself that you don't have any innate nature. The mind is neutral. It just knows. The thinking is skillful or unskillful, but those are habits, which aren't innate at all.

Or you can do what the Buddha did. This is something people tend to forget when they meditate. On the night of his awakening, his first knowledge was about himself, his narratives. You think you have narratives: He had narratives going way back, eons and eons. But he didn't jump straight from there to the present moment. He took a detour and thought about all the beings in the world: How about them? He saw that they all went through the same process—all different kinds of birth and rebirth—and on seeing them in a more universal way, he was able to see underlying patterns: what kind of actions were skillful, what kind of views underlay skillful actions that lead to fortunate rebirths, and how unskillful actions lead to unfortunate ones. It was by looking at the large picture

that he was able to see patterns. Only then did he look at the present moment from the perspective of those larger patterns. That helps cut through the “I am” and the individual narratives. You’re looking at events common to beings all over the world, and you’re looking at them in light of those larger patterns—not of natures but of actions. When you’re looking at greed, anger, and delusion in the mind in this way, it helps to loosen some of the sense of identity around them.

Another way to loosen that sense of identity is to think of the mind as a committee. The committee contains all kinds of members who propose all kinds of things. Just because somebody in the committee has proposed a bad idea doesn’t mean the committee is bad. The duty of the committee is to listen to the ideas brought to the floor figure out which is the best one to act on right now. If they make a mistake, they go back and undo the old decision, open the floor to suggestions, and arrive at a new decision. They don’t worry about the innate nature of the committee.

When you can see events in the mind in this way, then you’re really ready to meditate, because it allows you to deal with them just as events, as instances of intention and the results of intentions. When you put aside the “I am,” you’re in a much better position to see things for what they actually do, and then you can deal with them in the most appropriate way.

It was only after the Buddha taught Rahula all of these things that he said, “Okay, sit down. This is how you do breath meditation.”

So when *you* sit down to do breath meditation, it’s good to reflect on these attitudes. They’re your tools, your means for reading the events that are arising and passing away, and also for reading the results of applying different techniques. They help you figure out which technique is useful for which kind of issue, what’s getting results, what’s not getting results. That’s how you develop your discernment. You see cause and effect, skillful and unskillful, i.e., the four noble truths. You develop the path, so you can comprehend suffering and eventually let go of its cause. That’s how you realize the end of suffering: by experimenting, by exploring, by bringing the right attitudes and the right mental qualities to whichever meditation technique you choose. Those qualities are the factors that make all the difference. So do your best to bring the full set of mature qualities to meditation. That’s how you get results.