

Starting At The Beginning

Experiencing And Knowing The Breath

The act of placing one's attention on the breath, and keeping it there, doesn't sound too difficult. What could be so hard about shifting attention to something as real and tangible as breathing, and simply staying focused on that process? You may discover this is more difficult than you think.

Learning how to relax into the experience of the breath is a foundational skill in meditation. It lays the groundwork for everything that follows. In the Insight (Vipassana) Meditation tradition, the breath is used as an anchor to stabilize the energies in the mind and body as well as an object of meditation.

Most who begin an Insight Meditation class are initially surprised at their seeming inability to keep their attention on the breath. This is due, in part, to an expectation that this should be relatively effortless and a misunderstanding about the meditation process and the experience of meditation. You will experience frustration, confusion, and a sense of failure to the degree you have an idealized concept of what is supposed to happen during meditation.

So it is of some considerable importance at the beginning of your meditation education to devote the necessary time and effort to understand and make a habit of the basic elements of the meditation process.

Experiencing The Breath

The meditative process of experiencing the breath involves three components:

1. Connecting the attention to the breath;
2. Sustaining the connection, to the degree possible, during the full length of the in breath, then the full length of the out breath; and
3. Experiencing and knowing the qualities and sensations of the breath including the length, depth, rhythm, temperature, and movement in the body. Also experiencing and knowing the constant ongoing process and change of the breath.

The initial meditation process involves repeating these simple steps over and over again, until connecting and sustaining become a relaxed habit, and a process of experiencing, or experientially investigating, the qualities and sensations of the breath arises naturally. Once this begins to happen, the breath becomes a focal point of interest and curiosity.

Initially, it may be difficult to distinguish any real difference between one breath and another. As the ability to concentrate the mind on the breath develops, however, a rich and diverse experience will begin to unfold. You will notice even subtle changes in the breathing process and, eventually, its clear interrelationship with bodily sensations, emotions, and thoughts. This is the beginning of the process of discovery, which leads to transformation, then transcendence.

Our objective is to simply settle back into the moment, and allow ourselves to experience what is happening with the breath from the standpoint of neutral, non-judgmental observation. If we can do this, it allows us to see what is present as it is, not how we think it is, how we wish it were, or how we believe it is. It allows us to directly experience whatever is present without the filter of concepts and thought. This approach allows us to experience whatever is present--the breath, bodily sensations,

thoughts, emotions, the interactions and relationships of these different manifestations of energy--without distortion. This experience is sometimes referred to as "mindfulness."

Working With Distractions, "Mistakes" and "Doing It The Right Way"

But you can count on this: Distractions will pull the attention off the breath. The mind will wander and become lost in thought. Impatience, judgment, self-criticism, and doubt may appear and a struggle ensue to try to change the experience that is present. An urge to move, a physical discomfort, or an itch may suddenly seem compelling. All of this will happen while you're trying to just be quiet and experience the breath. At some point in this process, you will realize that you are no longer focusing your attention on the breath. You will wake up to reality that the mind, despite your best efforts, is everywhere but the breath.

How we relate to these common mental and emotional events, and the experience of waking up, is one of the most important moments in the meditation process. At this point, there are two options: A reaction of aversion, self-judgment, and criticism; or a response of non-judgmental acknowledgment that the attention has wandered off the breath, and a gentle returning of the attention to the breath. A reaction sets up a struggle with the natural tendency of the mind to wander and sets in motion a negative or aversive cycle that is often difficult to break. Many find this is a habit of mind that must be slowly unlearned and replaced with a more conscious response. A response allows the meditation process to continue without the turbulence associated with reaction.

This choice in every moment of our life - reaction or response - conditions and directs our thoughts, emotions, and actions. It points our minds towards a conscious way of living, or living unconsciously. Waking up from being lost in reaction and habit to the possibility of choice is one of the liberating features of the meditative process. The Spanish poet Antonio Machado talks of this moment of choice in this way:

Beyond living and dreaming
there is something more important:
Waking up.

Why is this so important? Because it is the beginning of seeing and understanding our lives clearly and pointing our intention and energies towards a conscious and caring life, and away from thoughts, emotions, and conduct that will harm us and others.

In taking on any new project or attempting to learn a new skill, it is natural for us to want to "do it the right way" and to avoid making "mistakes." Frequently, however, we only have a hazy, ill-defined standard of what "right" looks or feels like, which has not been the subject of careful examination. This allows the judging, comparing mind to find fault with almost anything we do. When we fail to live up to this nebulous test of correctness, we feel that we have failed, or feel inadequate or deficient. This is a set up for disappointment and confusion.

There are, of course, a number of basic skills that one needs to master to meditate skillfully. They do not include beating yourself up, punishing self-criticism, or constant self-judgment.

From the perspective of the meditative process, it's essential to non-judgmentally reframe and redefine what we normally classify as "mistakes" as "experience." Testing, exploring, finding what works and what does not, exploring what is skillful and what is not are at the center of the meditative experience.

They are key elements in developing and honing meditative skills. Self-confidence, trust, and a sense of authenticity arise from this process. This is how we discover our own true path.

Antonio Machado captures the potential beauty of understanding our "mistakes" and "failures" in this way.

Last night, as I was sleeping
I dreamt - marvelous error!
that I had a beehive
here inside my heart.

And the golden bees
were making white combs
and sweet honey
from my old failures.

The reason there are no mistakes or failures in the meditative experience relates to the object of our effort: to non-judgmentally experience whatever is present and see into its true nature. This eventually leads to insight, wisdom and compassion.

So if you find yourself struggling, stop for a moment; take a deep breath; relax the body; let go of the struggle; then open with kindness to the experience of the breath. Connect, sustain, experience, and know.

Noting - An Essential Tool Supporting

Focused Attention and Experiential Understanding

An essential tool to support and develop the ability to "focus" and concentrate the mind, and to experientially understand what is present, is a technique called "noting," "naming," or "labeling." As attention is placed and sustained on the breath, a gentle, silent descriptive note is made to describe what is happening. This involves perhaps five percent of the overall effort of the attention.

If the attention is focused on the sensation of the breath at the abdomen, a note of "rising" would be made concurrent with the expansion of the abdomen, and a note of "falling" concurrent with the contraction of the abdomen. If the attention is focused on the tips of the nostrils, a note of "in" would be made concurrent with the breath cross the entrance to the nostrils, and a note of "out" concurrent with its departure.

If used regularly, this technique can be a powerful way to assist the mind in maintaining its connection with the breath. It increases the continuity of attention and strengthens the power of concentration. It helps the mind stay bright, alert, and aware. It supports the mind in understanding the process that is occurring.

This technique may, at first, seem cumbersome or awkward. This feeling will slowly begin to change as you become accustomed to, and familiar with, the process. The goal is to work with this technique until it becomes a natural, comfortable, and relaxed part of the meditative process. If you can develop this skill, it will eventually provide you with a powerful tool that will later be used in the meditation processes associated with bodily sensations, thoughts, and emotions.