

Preparing the Mind for Meditation

We learn the skill of mindfulness of breathing in the context of formal sitting meditation. It's important to have an environment that's conducive to developing the skill, an environment in which we're removed from the affairs of our lives, where there's a degree of quiet, silence. As the Buddha puts it, in introducing the steps for breath meditation:

“There is the case where a monk—having gone to the wilderness, to the shade of a tree, or to an empty building—sits down folding his legs crosswise, holding his body erect and establishing mindfulness to the fore. Always mindful, he breathes in; mindful he breathes out.”

(MN 118)

It's important to set aside time for meditation, to establish some distance from our lives, to have some time during which our only concern is our practice. And it's very useful to have a relatively secluded place – some latter-day version of a shady tree or abandoned building – in which to practice. Ultimately, though, our preparation for meditation is mental preparation. To this end, we've found that dharma students will find significant benefit if they prepare the mind for meditation by practicing three steps:

- 1- Seeing What's in the Mind
- 2- Developing Skillful Intention
- 3- Brightening the Mind

Seeing What's in the Mind

In “seeing what’s in the mind,” we look to see what the mind is like when we sit down to meditate. What is the attitude in the mind? Specifically, what is attitude vis-à-vis the meditation? How is the mind disposed to the meditation we’re about to engage in?

To a large degree, we’re looking to see if there’s resistance in the mind.

In practicing meditation, we’re training ourselves to be in the present moment. We establish ourselves in the present moment by keeping our attention on the body; in breath meditation, we use the breath to anchor our attention in the body. Putting it simply, we could say that in meditation practice we’re learning to come “out of the head, into the body.” When we’re not present, we’re “in the head.” Our mind isn’t focused on the body; it’s preoccupied, involved in thinking, lost in thought worlds.

We make the effort to be in the body, to be present, because it is in the present moment that we’re able to know true happiness. To know the happiness of the heart, we have to be in the body.

Our problem is, we don’t want to be present. We don’t want to be “in the body.” Accordingly, when we sit down to meditate, to be mindful of the breath, we experience resistance.

When you sit down to practice meditation, if you look closely at what’s in your mind you’ll almost invariably discern some kind of resistance. There are numerous ways that resistance manifests; each of us has our own patterns of resistance. Perhaps, the resistance you see in your mind as you begin to meditate is quite blatant. Perhaps, simply enough, you don’t

want to meditate. You're riddled with aversion. Perhaps there's a quality of dread. Perhaps there's anxiety, apprehension.

Your resistance may take the form of restlessness. There may be a voice in the mind telling you that you don't have time for meditation, you have too many things to do, too many important matters to attend to.

Sometimes resistance appears as desire; maybe there's a desire to bypass the meditation and partake in some sort of sense pleasure, get something to eat, listen to the radio, check email, etc.

Perhaps your resistance takes a more subtle form. Perhaps there's a subtle aversion in the mind. Or maybe there's dullness in the mind, lack of affect.

Perhaps there's a quality of laziness in the mind, a lack of willingness to make the necessary effort.

When there's resistance to meditation – and, again, there's almost always some degree of resistance when we make an effort to be in the present moment – it's crucial that we do something about it. If we don't address our resistance, it will have a deleterious effect our ability to meditate. It's the same as it is with most things in life. If you're resistant to what you're doing, you're only going to get so much out of what you're doing. If, for instance, you're feeling resistance to reading this book, you're only going to get so much from reading it. You're only going to get so far. You may pick up a few things. But you won't get the full benefit.

The dharma student, practicing breath mediation, learns to see the resistance in his mind. He learns to be mindful of the movements of resistance, in real time, as he sits down to meditate. Seeing what's in his mind, he might label it: "resistance." Or more specifically: "aversion," "restlessness," "desire," etc.

In being mindful of these mind states, these expressions of resistance, the dharma student plays the role of the observer; he takes a step back from the mind state and he looks at it. He observes it, as if he was looking at a painting on a wall or words on a movie screen. In observing the mind state, the dharma student changes his relationship to it. Instead of engaging in the aversion, restlessness, etc., he observes it. In doing so, he gets some distance from it. He creates some space into which he can insert a skillful intention.

Developing Skillful Intention

In preparing for breath meditation, we set an intention that includes two components:

- 1- What we're going to do – we're going to practice mindfulness of breathing, following the steps the Buddha laid out.
- 2- How we're going to do it – we're going to practice with compassion and lovingkindness.

A skillful intention is an intention informed by skillful mental qualities, the qualities of the heart, the sublime attitudes of compassion and lovingkindness. How do we establish this kind of wholehearted intention? The answer is remarkably simple. We fabricate the intention. We tell ourselves that we're going to practice with compassion and lovingkindness. We say the words. The technical term is “internal verbal fabrication.” We articulate, in our minds, our intention. For instance, we might say something as simple as: “I'm going to practice mindfulness of breathing. I'm going to practice with compassion. I'm going to practice with lovingkindness.” In fact, it might seem too simple. We might think that there has to be more to it. But what we're

doing, in fabricating skillful intention, is extremely powerful. We're changing our thinking. It's through changing our thinking, the Buddha teaches, that transformation begins.

As we develop skillful intention, using internal verbal fabrication, it's important to understand what we mean when we use the words we're using. What does it mean when we say we're going to practice breath meditation with compassion? What do we mean by compassion?

Compassion is the heart's response to suffering. It's expressed in the wish we have, inside, in the heart, to be free from suffering – although we may be cut off from it, it's a wish that we all have (in having compassion for others, we connect to our wish for them, that they have freedom from their suffering).

When we take action informed by the skillful intention of compassion, we take action in support of our wish to be free from suffering.

We practice meditation so that we can find freedom from suffering. We develop the skill of mindfulness of breathing – and, in doing so, cultivate skillful internal pleasure – because it's a skill that will enable us to move toward an alleviation of our suffering.

In connecting to the heart quality of compassion, the dharma student acknowledges that there is suffering in her life. The truth is, we've all experienced, and continue to experience, pain and suffering; we're all been part of this human existence, woven through with its countless forms of pain and suffering.

As we set out to meditate, we remember that we're doing what we're doing because we have a wish to be free from suffering. And as we practice, we reinforce our intention. We continue, throughout the meditation, to remember to practice with compassion.

The other sublime attitude that informs skillful intention is lovingkindness.

Lovingkindness is expressed in the wish we have to be happy, to have happiness of heart (and the wish we have for others that they have true happiness in their lives). In developing skillful intention, when we assert, “I’m going to practice with lovingkindness,” we align ourselves with our wish to be happy.

The cultivation of skillful internal pleasure, as the Buddha realized, leads us to true happiness. As such, it’s an act of love. It’s an act of self-love. And it’s an act of love for others.

As we make an effort to develop inner pleasure, we remember that what we’re doing is an act of love; we’re taking action in support of our wish to have a greater happiness in this life.

In developing skillful intention, the dharma student fabricates her intention. And, if possible, she touches in to a felt sense of her heart, the qualities of compassion of lovingkindness. Compassion and lovingkindness can be felt. As a general rule, we feel these qualities in the heart center – not the physical beating heart, but an area usually somewhere in the middle of the chest. Some people are able to connect quite readily to the felt sense of compassion and lovingkindness. For others, it takes time. But gradually, as we develop skillful intention, we learn to connect to a felt sense of compassion and lovingkindness. Gradually, we practice straight from the heart.

Brightening the Mind

If the meditator is well-prepared – if her mind is well-prepared – she'll have a much greater opportunity to develop concentration. It's particularly important for householders, involved in the affairs of the world, to take time before meditation to prepare the mind. As a lay person, your mind is prone to agitation, dis-ease, stress; there's a tendency to be unfocused, easily distracted. You'll be well-served, therefore, if you see to it that your mind is in a good place before you begin to be mindful of the breath.

In brightening the mind, we cultivate the heart quality of joy. This is a specific type of joy, sometimes known as appreciative joy, or, simply, appreciation.

When there's joy in the mind, meditation flourishes. This is a central cause and effect relationship, explicated by the Buddha in his delineation of the path that leads to true happiness. Appreciative joy is a direct cause leading to the development of the qualities of jhana. The degree to which there's brightness in the mind is correlative to the degree that we'll be able to cultivate skillful pleasure.

We cultivate appreciative joy by reflecting on our own goodness and the goodness in the world.

The reflection includes three main components:

- 1- Recollecting the blessing of our goodness and the goodness in the world.
- 2- Connecting to gratitude.
- 3- Connecting to joy.

First, we recollect our goodness and the goodness in the world. It's useful to recognize the expressions of goodness as blessings.

The recognition of our blessings gives rise to gratitude. Gratitude is an emotion. We feel it in the body.

Gratitude gives rise to appreciative joy. In connecting to appreciative joy, we might ascertain a quality of brightness in the heart center, a glint of light, a felt sense of joy.

The recognition of our own goodness is an important part of the process of training the mind and the cultivation of the qualities of jhana.

There are, classically, three elements of our goodness that we learn to reflect on, in an effort to develop appreciative joy. Known as the three forms of “merit,” they are:

- 1- Generosity
- 2- Ethical conduct (Virtue)
- 3- Meditation

(For a comprehensive exploration of the skillful qualities, the reader may want to refer to *The Skill of Living*.)⁵

In reflecting on generosity, we recall the ways we’ve practiced “skillful giving.” We bring to mind, in a general or specific manner, the ways we’ve given the gift of our resources and our time in support of others, in helping others to find freedom from suffering.

In reflecting on ethical conduct, we recollect the ways in which we’ve made an effort to practice non-harming. We develop ethical conduct by refraining from taking actions that are harmful to ourselves and others.

The Buddha gave specific parameters for developing ethical conduct. For householders, he delineated five precepts. The precepts identify five modes of harmful action..

The five precepts are:

- 1-To refrain from taking the life of any living creature.
- 2-To refrain from stealing.

3-To refrain from engaging in illicit sexual conduct.

4-To refrain from false speech.

5-To refrain from consuming intoxicants that cause heedlessness.

It's particularly important to pay attention to the ways that we cause harm through our speech. If we engage in unskillful speech, it will cause agitation in the mind. The body will be afflicted with dis-ease, and, accordingly, it will be difficult to cultivate skillful internal pleasure.

The Buddha delineates four forms of harmful speech:

- (a) False speech (all forms of lying, blatant and subtle)
- (b) Abusive speech (harsh, abrasive, loud, angry, aggressive, violent speech)
- (c) Divisive speech (speaking in ways that create division between people; setting people apart from and against each other)
- (d) Idle speech (frivolous speech, including gossip)

The third form of merit is our meditation; specifically, the effort we make to train the mind. For dharma students, this entails the time and energy we put into our "on the cushion" meditation practice; and it includes the effort we make "off the cushion," the effort we make, as we go through our days, to abandon unskillful qualities and cultivate skillful qualities.

In preparing the mind for meditation, it's especially valuable to reflect on our own goodness. Meditation, we might say, is a confrontation with ourselves. As many a wise being has noted, the confrontation with ourselves is the most profound and challenging confrontation

we'll ever have. Indeed, for most of us, it's a confrontation we'd rather not have. Much of the time, we spend in an effort to get away from ourselves.

If we're going to spend 30, 45 minutes in meditation, alone with ourselves, we're going to have to want to be with ourselves for that amount of time. We're going to need to be on reasonably good terms with ourselves. We're going to need, at least to some extent, to feel good about ourselves. We're going to need a degree of self-esteem. Unfortunately, most of us don't feel so good about ourselves. Most of us suffer a level of low self esteem. Most of us don't contemplate our good qualities; instead, we tend to focus on our weaknesses, faults, mistakes, failures.

By developing our skillful qualities – generosity, ethical conduct, the effort we make to train the mind – and, in turn, by reflecting on these qualities, we connect to the truth of our goodness. We begin to feel good about ourselves. We begin to feel alright with the notion of spending 30, 45 minutes alone with ourselves. We put ourselves in a good position to practice breath meditation.

In brightening the mind, we can also reflect on the goodness we find in the world. To that end, we might recollect these three categories of goodness:

- 1- Other beings
- 2- The dharma
- 3- The preciousness of life

In reflecting on “other beings,” we recall the beings who've supported us in our efforts to move toward a greater happiness in our lives. As we've made our way along the path, there've undoubtedly been many beings who've supported us, in various ways, blatant and subtle.

The dharma, the teachings of the Buddha, provides us with a way to develop our goodness. Reflecting, we remember this. We remember that the dharma offers a path, comprised of skills that we have the ability to practice, that leads to true happiness.

And, finally, in cultivating brightness in the mind, we reflect on the preciousness of life. In doing so, we acknowledge the goodness in life, the goodness that is available to us as sojourners in this human realm. As human beings we have an innate ability to know true happiness; and we have an ability to develop the skills that will enable us to know this happiness.

If meditation is a journey to the present moment, for most of us it's a problematic journey. The problem, as we've suggested, is that we don't want to be present. For most of us, most of the time, the present moment is the last place we want to be. Most of our lives we've sought to escape the present moment. We've held a negative perception of the present moment. We've considered the present moment unpalatable, painful, anxiety-producing, fearful.

If we're going to practice meditation, we have to begin to change our relationship to the present moment. We have to be able to find some joy in the present moment.

As we reflect on our blessings, we bring brightness to the mind. We connect to a quality of appreciation. In the process, we begin to feel more inclined to remain in the present moment. We begin to feel alright with the prospect of spending the next 30, 45 minutes, alone with ourselves, in meditation.

Copyright © Peter Doobinin 2019