

A Mirror for Body & Mind

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We focus on the breath when we meditate because the breath is where the mind and the body meet. The breath is like a mirror both for the body and for the mind. When we start out, we want to make sure our mirror is in good shape, that it's smooth and clean, and not concave or convex or full of waves that are going to distort the picture of the body, distort the picture of the mind.

So, to begin with, focus on letting the breath be even and comfortable. Notice the ways you pull it in and push it out and try to let it simply come in and go out on its own without your directing it too much. You can nudge it a little bit here and there to make sure that it stays as comfortable as possible, but you don't want to force it too much because when you start forcing it that's when the mirror starts getting waves. So test it to begin with. Just see what kind of breathing feels best for the body and what's easiest for the mind to focus on and then try to maintain that.

Now, you'll find after a while that things change. The way of breathing that feels good to begin with doesn't necessarily feel good all the way through the hour. So you have to be on top of the breath to watch when that sense of comfort begins to change. It's as if you were regulating a carburetor in an engine. Sometimes you need to mix a lot of air with the gas, other times just a little, in order to keep the car going at a steady speed, because sometimes the car is heading down hill, sometimes it's heading up hill, and the amount of gas it needs in order to maintain its speed changes. The same with the body: sometimes the body hardly seems to need any breath at all in order to feel comfortable—it's as if you were sitting perfectly still without breath coming in, without breath going out, and yet the energy level in the body seems just right. At other times you really have to pump it in. Sometimes you need to breathe heavily in order to keep it awake. But you experiment with it in order to find the sense of "just right" and then try to maintain that sense of just right. That's when the breath is smooth, when your mirror is smooth. You can see yourself clearly.

We say that the breath is a mirror for the body because once you focus on the breath everything there in the body appears, but it's going to be distorted if the breath isn't even. So even out the breath and then see what you've got. See if the body feels too heavy, feels too light, feels too cold, feels too warm. If the breath is even and full and still, you can actually think of the opposite qualities and balance the body out. If you're feeling too cold while sitting here, think of the fire element in the body. If the body feels too heavy, think of the breath or think of the space that not only surrounds the body but also permeates through all the atoms. That way you can lighten things up. Or sometimes you feel dizzy and light-headed, which is a sign that you've got to think more of the earth element. So you can use your sense of the breath to even things out, use it as the mirror

for the body so that you have a good comfortable place to stay as you're meditating.

This sense of comfort is important because the mind needs a place of comfort to settle down. If it feels ill at ease wherever it is, it's not going to settle. It's just going to keep running around like a drop of oil on a very hot pan—it bounces all over. And how can you see anything when you're bouncing around? It's like watching over a scientific experiment when you're bouncing around on a pogo stick. You can't see anything worthwhile at all. So you have to make things comfortable and steady. Then you can see. This is how we use the breath as a mirror for the body.

More important, though, is using the breath as a mirror for the mind because when the breath settles down you can see what's going on in the mind clearly. Oftentimes, many things appear in the mind and you don't notice them directly. You sense them because the breath changes. For example, when fear arises or greed or anger or lust, there is going to be a change in the way you breathe. Usually in the beginning we're too slow to see these things arising directly in the mind, but we can see their reflections arising in the breath—the breath alerts you that something is going on in the mind. Or you may notice these things when they've taken over, when they've forced the breathing to the point where you feel that you've got to get that emotion out of your system. You notice that in the breath as well. Well, you can breathe through that sense of discomfort. It doesn't make the anger or fear or whatever go away, but it does make it feel more manageable because the effects are not there in the body. You don't have the sense that you've got to drive it out of your system. You can breathe right through it. Relax the sense of tightness. Relax the sense of constriction. Relax the sense that something is blocked or oppressive there in the body.

When that gets relaxed, then what have you got? You've got the mind—the state of anger in the mind, the state of greed, delusion, fear, whatever. Then you can watch that. That's what we're after when we meditate.

We focus on the breath not because we're after the breath, but the breath is like a mirror, or you could call it a bait, for the mind. As when you buy worms to go fishing: you buy worms not because you want the worms, but because you want the fish. The breath is what brings the mind into the present, especially when the breath feels comfortable—it gets easier and easier for the mind to settle in there. Once the mind has settled in and the qualities of the body begin to settle down and the breath is still, that's when you can see the mind clearly. Like tuning into a radio station: At first there's a lot of static and you can't hear what's on the station, but when you tune the radio properly, right on the station's frequency, the static disappears and there you've got the message.

It's the same with the breath and the mind. When the breath is tuned to the body and the body is tuned to breath, the static—all this frantic energy in the body—begins to settle down and what's left is what's going on in the mind. All the gross stuff in the body begins to settle down and what you've got left are the

more refined events in the mind. This way you can see what's going on in the mind. You can see the anger, you can see the delusion as they arise in the mind because there's very little to distract you, there's very little to get in the way. And then you can deal directly with what arises in the mind.

When there's a feeling of anger, you work first through the physical side and what's left is the mental side. Why is this anger taking over? Why does it seem so insistent? Why does it seem so important? Why does it seem so right? You have to ask it, "What are you doing here? Why are you here? What is your purpose?" Don't identify with the anger, that's lesson number one. As soon as you identify with it you can't analyze it because it has snuck inside. But if you see the anger simply as an event happening in the mind, then you can watch it and probe into its reasons. Question it and listen to its reasons: It's going to say, "You ought to be angry because....." So you probe it further: "Why do you believe that 'because'?" A lot of times it will say something that just seems to make perfect sense if you don't really look at it. But if you dig down deep inside and ask, "What are reasons behind that? What are the assumptions that lie behind that? Are they really worthwhile?" And then it will come up with a new 'because'. And then you keep asking probing questions.

Dogen once said that the essence of meditation is dethinking thinking, which means you take your thinking processes apart. You ask, "Well, is this really true? What about the opposite? Why do we have to accept either side?" Take things apart. Look at them from all sides. And when the mind says, "This is obviously 'x'." Well, maybe it's 'y', maybe it's 'w', maybe it's 'z'. You've got to play with it like this so you're not constantly accepting everything that comes whispering into your mind.

There's a great sermon by Ajaan Lee where says that there's not just one consciousness there in the body. There are the consciousnesses of all the worms and all the germs and all the other animals living in the body. And when you live together like this, it's easy enough for their thought patterns to interfere with yours. It's like two radios next to a remote telephone. Sometimes the radios can pick up the remote telephone messages. So when a thought comes into your mind, how do you know necessarily that it's yours? How do you know that it's something that you ought to believe? Even if you think it's just your own mind speaking, well the mind is there producing all kinds of stuff. It's like a factory run by a very irresponsible person. It just keeps churning out stuff with no guarantee about the quality control because there is no quality control. Whatever the machines happen to stamp out, that's what comes pouring out of the factory. And if you sit there and buy everything that comes out of the factory, you're going to get overwhelmed.

If you believe everything that the mind creates, when it says, "You ought to be angry about this, you ought to be fed up about that, you ought to do something about this" you have to stop and ask, "Why?" This way you get down to the basic assumptions that are driving the mind. The assumptions don't usually come right out on the surface. They hide behind other things because a lot of these

assumptions are based on very silly and very childish notions. The reason they get away with it is because they can disguise themselves in other forms. So what you have to do is strip the disguises away, just keep probing. After a while, they'll have to come straight out with what their real reasons are. And once you see the real reasons, you realize that they're pretty stupid, pretty childish, pretty selfish. You realize that you don't want to have anything to do with them and then you can drop them.

It's the seeing the stupidity of your own thought processes and seeing that they're not necessary—they're creating a lot of suffering and you don't have to play along with them: that's discernment. That's when you naturally let go. You can't force yourself to let go before then. If you force yourself to let go, it's simply another kind of concentration practice and the mind will let go as long as you're mindful, as long as you're watching it, but then as soon as you turn your back it will hang on again. But if you see with your own discernment, you see truly that this is what the mind is doing and you realize that you let go not because somebody else tells you to, but because you see that you're causing suffering and you don't have to. You let go. The mind settles down and things are very clear, very clean, but don't think that the business has ended. You've just cleaned the workshop so you can really get down to work. This is when things start appearing in the mind and you can really start asking questions about them, taking them apart.

So we work on the breath not because we want the breath, but because it's a useful tool for other things. On the side of the body, it's a very helpful way to make it easier to sit here for long periods of time, as you can breathe through pain, as you can adjust breath sensations to the different parts of the body, so that you are taking care of your set of tools here —this is how you ought to regard the body, as your tool in the practice. On the side of the mind, the breath clears things out so that what's in the mind can appear clearly. That's when you have a chance to start your investigation, to start probing around inside.

There is no set technique for gaining insight. If you set up a technique, it turns back into a concentration practice because you're forcing things to be this way, forcing things to be that way. With real discernment, it's like finding a vine here in the orchard strangling some of our avocado trees, so you have to trace it down—where is the root? You keep following the vine wherever it leads. Sometimes you realize you're following it not to the root but out to the end, so you turn around and head back in the other direction and finally you're tracing in the right direction. You're pulling, pulling and pulling and finally you get to where the root is and once you pull the root out the whole thing dies.

That's what insight practice is about when you start seeing these things that control the mind and they really have no right to. They have no business doing it, but you've given in to them, not realizing what you've been doing. This is the way it is for all of us. This why we're still here as people. This why we got born. We give in to these things, we're willing to play along without really realizing the full implications of what we're doing, without realizing what's going to come as a

result. But once you start seeing causes and effects and you see what's actually causing the suffering, the stress that you're experiencing: that's when you begin to let go, not because anybody told you to, but because that's the only thing to do. That's the only intelligent thing to do.

So look at where you are in your practice. If you're still having problems with the breath, stay with the breath, work on the breath. If you're having problems with the body, work on the body. Once you have these things cleared up, then you can turn around and look straight at the mind. That's when it really gets fascinating. Then the technique turns from a technique you've learned from a book—somebody else's technique—into you're own direct exploration of your own mind. That's when things really come home.