



Meditations on
Breath & Loving-Kindness

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Meditation on Breath



Meditation on breathing is one of the most widely practiced of Buddhist meditation techniques. It was devised and developed by the Buddha himself, and he taught it during his lifetime. For 2,500 years it has been widely studied both by monks and laypeople.

Breath meditation has many virtues. It is simple and portable – your breath goes with you wherever you go. It will be with you until your last breath. The breath is neither a fascinating, nor a repulsive object. It is neutral.

The breath is observed through contact. It is not visual; it is felt. The location to focus on is “at the entrance to the body.” The breath enters the body at the nostrils or the mouth. Some people have conditions where they must breathe through their mouth, if they have a cold, for example. They need not abandon breathing meditation. Contact of the breath at the lip is also a possible site, although it is difficult to feel the inhalation there. Primarily the breath is felt at the nose.

Begin by paying attention to the coolness of the inhalation inside the nostrils. The Buddha makes a simile that mindfulness is similar to a sentry at the entrance to a walled city. The sentry is posted at the entrance. He does not have to know who is inside the city and who is outside. All he has to know is that there is just one way in and out of that city, and that is the entranceway. Therefore, he guards the entrance in the same way mindfulness observes the entrance of the breath. It does not follow it inside the body. It does not concern itself with the outside of the body. It merely acts as a sentry. All the air coming into the body or going out of the body must pass through the nostrils. So we post mindfulness at the nostrils.

The same qualities we value a sentry for we value mindfulness for at the nostrils: alertness, constancy, non-distraction, non-sleepiness, non-agitation, and inability to be bribed. Being bribed is like asking your mind to pay attention to the breath, and then seeing other more enticing thoughts and images come along. You may be bribed into paying attention to those, rather than to the breath. The sentry should not be easily bought off. You have to refuse the offers of more tantalizing images, thoughts, plans and

reveries. You must strictly observe the breath at the entrance of the body.

One should not be over-rigid and excessively zealous, otherwise this produces agitation. Neither should you be drifting off into sleep – too relaxed. You need the middle ground, a balance between tension and drifting away. Feel the coolness of the inhalation. Feel the warmth of the exhalation.

The Buddha advises we pay attention to the duration of the breath. Is it a long breath, or is it a short breath? He doesn't ask you to control your breath or your breathing; merely to breathe naturally and unselfconsciously. You should observe and not interfere. But note a long breath when one occurs on an inhalation or an exhalation, and a short breath when one occurs on an inhalation or an exhalation.

When your mind has established itself and is able to pay attention long enough to observe whether or not it is a long or short breath, then you can ask it to do something a little more challenging, as the

mind may wander and still know whether it is a long breath or a short breath.

Now, the Buddha asks that we observe the beginning, the middle and the end of each breath, both the inhalation and the exhalation. In other words, the entire duration of the breath from its beginning to its end. This is a new demand on mindfulness: that the sentry observes every detail of what is passing in and out of that entrance. The sentry's attention must be constant, not wandering at all. It is a more demanding level of practice.

If you find the mind occasionally wanders – which is very common and to be expected – one should not feel frustrated or a failure at this normal action of the mind. Instead, simply notice when your attention has wandered and start the exercise again, noticing the beginning, the middle and the end of each.

This exercise itself should not produce excess tension or a hypnotic effect. It is an attempt to increase alertness, awareness and the capacity to sustain attention. If you succeed, you will feel a very great sense of clarity, presence, and lack of distraction. You will not

feel in the least bored, agitated, irritated, nor will you feel in doubt. You will be confidently observing the flow of breath in this very lucid condition.

You will be aware of precisely what you are doing. This is the first benefit of this exercise, that one experiences well-being here and now. You have dispelled the variety of hindrances or negative mental states that occur in the ordinary mind: ill will, sensual fantasies or obsessions, agitation, sloth and drowsiness, and indecision or problematic doubting. By observing the breath, one is delivered from these negative mental states.

Proceeding further, one may begin to notice a subtle change, taking place at the very point of contact where the breath meets the nostrils. It may turn from a flowing sensation – a cottony flow of air gently against the nostrils – to a static pressure, a light, airy but motionless effect. It is as if light cotton batten is being touched to the nostrils. This is a sign that the mind is becoming very focused, still and calm. The object, the breath, begins to take on the quality of stillness rather than motion. This is a sign of increasing concentration, increasing focus, and increasing stillness of mind.

At this point the aches and pains in one's body tend to dissolve. The body is not troubled, and experiences a rather pleasant sensation. The mind also experiences a pleasant sensation of being undistracted, calm, strong, even, present, alert, and untroubled.

Now, one may turn one's attention to the topic of the impermanent nature of this process, or the impermanent nature of all phenomena, or the substanceless nature of the breath. Since it is a flow, there is nothing enduring or substantial to it. Noticing this characteristic in the breath, one can also notice this characteristic in all sense objects – whatever one sees, hears, smells, tastes, touches and thinks. All are flowing; all are insubstantial.

The mind in this rested, very alert state, when asked to investigate the flowing nature of reality, will often perceive it with greater impact than in normal distracted states of consciousness. It will be less preoccupied with this flowing world, or realize that since all things in the world are flowing, they cannot be grasped, held or controlled. They do not last. When the mind sees this characteristic, this sign, it relaxes its grip and its futile attempt to control, to grasp, and to hold. This is one of the direct benefits of

calming the mind through breath meditation, turning the attention to the flowing quality of the breath, and then further, to the flowing quality of all phenomena.

You may also wish to go deeper into tranquility by focusing the mind on the still quality of the breath, that is, this cottony characteristic where the breath contacts the nostrils. When that becomes very, very still, this is an indication that the mind is stilling. By continuing to focus without too great a tension and without relaxation, in an alert way, one goes deeper into stillness, clarity, and a profound well-being. There is a lack of pain in the body, a decrease of pleasant feelings in the body, and an increase of joy.

This is in the direction of profound concentration, the eighth factor of the Noble Eightfold Path. Do not expect to enter this state without a good deal of preparation, without a good deal of refinement in your life. It requires a great deal of sensitivity and refinement of the mind. On the other hand, do not think it impossible to calm the mind, to produce clarity and stillness in the mind. It is possible for the ordinary person to develop. Given

enough patience and time and correct practice, one may learn the great value of breath meditation.

Breath meditation is something that can unfold during the entire lifetime. It becomes one's best friend. It becomes a refuge. It becomes an unending source of clarity and stillness from which to base investigation into the nature of reality, the nature of truth, the nature of goodness. It is an invaluable aid to awakening, taught by the Buddha himself, practiced by the Buddha himself, and recommended by twenty-five centuries of teachers of meditation.

I leave you with these instructions. May you be well, happy, and peaceful.



Metta Sutta

Teaching on Loving-Kindness



This is what should be done
By one who is skilled in goodness,
And who knows the path of peace:

Let them be able and upright,
Straightforward and gentle in speech,
Humble and not conceited,
Contented and easily satisfied,
Unburdened with duties and frugal in their ways,
Peaceful and calm and wise and skilful,
Not proud and demanding in nature.

Let them not do the slightest thing
That the wise would later reprove.

Wishing: In gladness and in safety,
May all beings be at ease!
Whatever living beings there may be,
Whether they are weak or strong, omitting none,
The great or the mighty, medium, short, or small,

The seen and the unseen,
Those living near and far away,
Those born and to-be-born –
May all beings be at ease!

Let none deceive another,
Or despise any being in any state.
Let none through anger or ill-will
Wish harm upon another.

Even as a mother protects with her life,
Her child, her only child,
So with a boundless heart
Should one cherish all living beings.
Radiating kindness over the entire world:
Spreading upwards to the skies,
And downwards to the depths,
Outwards and unbounded,
Freed from hatred and ill-will.

Whether standing or walking, seated or lying down,
Free from drowsiness,
One should sustain this recollection.
This is said to be the sublime abiding.

By not holding to wrong views,
The pure-hearted one,
Having clarity of vision,
Being freed from all sense desires,
Is not born again into this world.

Loving-Kindness Recitation

May I be well, happy and peaceful. May no harm come to me,
May no difficulties come to me. May I always meet with success.
May I also have patience, courage, understanding, and determination
to meet and overcome the inevitable difficulties, problems and failures in life.
May my parents . . .
May my teachers . . .
May my relatives . . .
May my friends . . .
May all indifferent persons . . .
May my enemies . . .
Be well, happy and peaceful.
May no harm come to them,
May no difficulties come to them.
May they always meet with success.
May they also have patience, courage, understanding, and determination
to meet and overcome the inevitable difficulties, problems and failures in life.
May all living beings be well, happy and peaceful.
May no harm come to them,
May no difficulties come to them.
May they always meet with success.
May they also have patience, courage, understanding, and determination
to meet and overcome the inevitable difficulties, problems and failures in life.

Meditation on Loving-Kindness



The Buddha taught throughout his life that the practice of loving-kindness is central to happiness here and now, and happiness in the future. The practice of loving-kindness is a blameless practice. Its fruits are all positive. There are no negative by-products. The Buddha left us with several detailed discourses on loving-kindness and how to practice them.

The word 'loving-kindness' is an English translation of the word 'metta' which comes from the ancient Pali language. The word 'metta' has its roots in 'friendliness'. So friendliness is really what we're talking about when we speak of loving-kindness - a profound, deep friendliness towards other beings and towards oneself.

This quality of friendliness must be generated in the mind, cultivated and practiced often. People often feel that such emotions as loving-kindness or deep friendliness need to arise spontaneously, that they shouldn't be exercised, that they

should just happen, or that they drop into your mind from heaven. But the Buddha emphasizes again and again that although this is a heavenly state - a sublime abiding, a divine condition of the mind and the heart - it happens from you and not to you. You are the maker of your own heaven.

When the Buddha gave the discourse on loving-kindness, it is very interesting to note that the first quarter of the teachings are preliminaries to loving-kindness - what has to be done before you can satisfactorily practice loving-kindness.

Detailing the preliminaries, he begins by saying, "This is what should be done by one who is skilled in goodness and who knows the path of peace." "Skilled in goodness" means we have to know what is skilful and what is unskilful thought, speech, and action. To "know the path of peace" is to know the Noble Eightfold Path, which explains skilful and unskilful speech and action. Therefore, this knowledge is required for the regulated generation of loving-kindness. It is the solid basis for the practice. It requires some wisdom and knowledge.

The Buddha continues, “Let them be able and upright, straightforward and gentle in speech.” “Able and upright” is a kind of virtue, a kind of attitude. “Straightforward” is again a quality of character, a lack of deviance, a lack of cunning and conniving, being up-front and straight forward, but also “gentle in speech.” The speech is true but beneficial. These are also the foundations for loving-kindness.

As a basis for practicing loving-kindness, one must also be “humble and not conceited, contented and easily satisfied,” the Buddha continues. Humility means a lack of ego. It is a kind of flexibility. The grass is often compared to humility, while a brittle tree is compared to rigidity and conceit. When a strong wind blows, the brittle tree will break but the grass will bend and have no difficulty because it is low and flexible. So the low ego, the flexible personality, is not disturbed by reports from reality, either about themselves or about others, because they have not invested themselves with false dimensions or enlarged themselves inappropriately. They have little suffering.

The Buddha also mentions other prerequisites for loving-kindness. He says they are to be “contented and easily satisfied.” Contentment and satisfaction allow room for the generation of an emotion like loving-kindness. If one is constantly filled with ambition and the tension that goes with ambition – the drive to accumulate, the drive to have power – it doesn’t leave room for the peaceful, expansive nature of loving-kindness. These are two mutually exclusive mind states. To be discontented and demanding is opposed to the atmosphere of loving-kindness.

The Buddha then reminds us that those who wish to practice loving-kindness should be “unburdened with duties and frugal in their ways.” In the household life, it is sometimes difficult to be unburdened with duties. In the monastic life, it is certainly an ideal to seek a simple life in a small cottage or meditation dwelling without too many duties. But this ideal is something also to be aspired to in the household life.

The Buddha is saying that one should not clutter one's life with frantic activity, thinking that the mere rushing about and doing things is wise or profitable. Rather, one should undertake duties that are proper, necessary and helpful to oneself and others but without merely distracting oneself continuously. The cultivation of loving-kindness requires an undistracted mind.

Frugality is one of the ways in which you can allow yourself to have more time, not to be reckless in spending money or in accumulating things. One should be modest and moderate, knowing what is appropriate and what is not, what is necessary and what is frivolous, so that the mind is not burdened. One then has time and space to cultivate what is truly lasting and truly valuable.

The Buddha then goes on to mention other skilful states for generating loving-kindness: "Peaceful and calm, and wise and skilful." Peace and calmness of mind are also foundations for the development of loving-kindness. And the reverse is also true: loving-kindness is also a foundation for peace and calm.

So if you want to practice a calming meditation, quite often it is helpful to start with loving-kindness. And if you want to practice loving-kindness, it is often helpful to start with a calming meditation. They support each other mutually.

He goes on, “One should wish that in gladness and safety, may all beings be at ease.” This is the essential wish of loving-kindness or friendliness, that beings be glad, safe and at ease. When we send out loving-kindness, we may use phrases like, “May all beings be happy, may all beings be at peace, may all beings be safe, may all beings be at ease.”

Then there is a series of categories. The Buddha makes sure that we include all beings without restriction. He says, “Whatever living beings that there may be, omitting none, weak or strong, great, medium, or small, the seen and the unseen, those living near or far away, the born and to be born (those in the womb), may all beings be at ease.” And we wish, “Let beings not deceive each other, let them not despise other beings, let

none through anger nor ill will wish harm upon another,” so we wish that they also may have loving-kindness.

The final simile that sums up the picture that the Buddha paints is the beautiful line, “Even as a mother protects with her life, her child, her only child, so with a boundless heart should one cherish all living beings, radiating kindness over the entire world. Upwards to the skies, downward to the depths, outward, unbounded, without any ill will.” So we have the simile of the affection of the mother for her only child, where she protects with her life her only child. This means one encourages the positive and discourages negativity. One should explore and dwell on the nature of the kindness a mother has for her only child.

”This is said to be the sublime abiding.” A heaven here and now is cultivated and generated through one’s own mind. And it is through one’s own mind, and no other way, that one produces the refinement of consciousness, which corresponds to heaven. The loving-kindness meditation answers many needs and wants

in our lives. But it is our responsibility to generate this. It is not dependent on who loves us. It is dependent on us generating love unconditionally for others.

So in meditation you may bring up the image and feeling of a mother's love for her only child, radiating it outward from oneself to other beings. Or you may begin with other beings, radiating loving-kindness towards oneself. You can begin with beings you have a natural affection for, and radiate it slowly outward to those more distant from you, or you can radiate loving-kindness to the vast universe itself.

These are all suggestions and techniques. There are no rules for this. All we want to understand is, does it work? And what works well for me? Images, poems, and songs – all of these things may work for different people. One should explore one's own techniques, and find whatever helps. That is the process of the meditation. You cannot over-meditate. Loving-kindness is always appropriate. It is not a disadvantage in the world.

The Buddha then describes how and when this should be practiced. “Whether standing, walking, seated or lying down, one should sustain this recollection.” So the posture is not important. It is a thing that one does with one’s mind, whether just before going to sleep or just upon waking up. Whether in the middle of the day, at work, sitting quietly in the forest, in the meditation room with a group or whether alone, one can practice, “one can sustain this recollection.” So one can recollect one’s attitude throughout the day.

The Buddha lists eleven benefits from the practice of loving-kindness. We will close this meditation by giving the entire discourse. In speaking to the monks, he said,

“O monks, there are eleven benefits from loving-kindness that arise from the emancipation of the heart. If repeated, developed, made much of, made a habit of, made a basis for, experienced, practiced, well- started, these eleven benefits are expected:

One sleeps well;

One wakes up well;

One does not have nightmares;

One becomes affectionate to human beings;

One becomes affectionate to non-human beings;

The deities protect one;

Neither fire nor poison nor weapons harm one;

One's mind is easily calmed;

One's countenance is serene;

One dies without confusion;

Beyond that, if one fails to attain Nibbana, one is reborn in the higher heavens.”

Without a doubt, these are benefits to be earnestly hoped for in one's life. We can see that loving-kindness is not something to be occasionally reflected upon, but “repeated, developed, made

much of, made a habit of, and practiced,” in order that it does have these benefits.

If it is a fragmentary practice, it will have fragmentary results. If it is a practice deeply steeped into the bones, then it will have a deep and profound result. It is a protection for yourself and a protection for others, both to body and mind. It is conducive to a great stability and sanity. It ensures ones maximum enjoyment of this life and predisposes one to an optimal fate after death.

So I leave you with these words and images from the Buddha on the practice of loving-kindness or profound friendliness. May you be well, happy, and peaceful.





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