

# Start Out Small

By

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Focus on your breath. As for what's going to happen as you focus on the breath - put that question aside. As for where the meditation is going to take you and how it's going to take you there, put those thoughts aside as well. Be careful that you don't know too much, because what you know too much of is not really knowing. A lot of it's guesswork.

A lot of our preconceived notions come out of ignorance. That's precisely what we're trying to get rid of, but our ignorance shapes the way we practice.

So it's important that you try to clear away as many of those expectations as possible when you come in to meditate. Just be with the breath. When the breath comes in, know it's coming in. When the breath goes out, know it's going out. That's all you really have to know right now. As for what's going to happen with the next breath, or the one after that, well, wait until those breaths come.

Ajaan Fuang once noted that nowadays we have lots of books on meditation, lots of explanations, and in some ways it's a help. But in other ways it's a hindrance, a hindrance in that we take a lot of our perceptions, our memories that we've picked up from books and Dharma talks, and bring them in to clutter up the present moment. That actually gets in the way of seeing what's going on. The clutter then gets compounded with our general impatience. We want to see results fast, and so in order to make them happen fast we squeeze them too much in the direction we think they should go. A lot of the results that come in meditation, however, have to come from simply allowing the causes to do their work, to develop on their own, without your having to push them too much in the direction you think they should go.

So, if you see your thoughts leaning into the next moment, or what's going to happen further on in the future, just pull back until you're right here, right now. As Ajaan Lee advises many times in his talks, "Start out

small." Notice where you feel the breath, and watch it. If it doesn't feel comfortable, you can nudge it into what seems to be a more comfortable direction. Don't be in too great of a hurry to go on to the next step.

We've got to come from a position of strength when we meditate. There's a passage in the Canon where the Buddha says that a person who doesn't have a basic level of happiness and goodness inside simply cannot do goodness. It sounds like a catch-22, but that's not the point. The point is that we all have a certain amount of goodness in our minds, so tap into that first. The goodness here means not only good intentions, but also having a good-natured attitude toward what you're doing, a good-natured attitude toward the people around you. That's why we chant the passages on goodwill every night, every night.

And bring some humor to the practice, the humor that allows you to laugh at your own mistakes. Without that, things start getting bitter, and when things start getting bitter inside then you start lashing out at the people around you outside. You start criticizing the technique - there are *all kinds* of things you can criticize. But if you can sit back for a bit and tap into your own good-natured attitude—and it's there inside all of us—try to bring that to the fore. Then work from that. It may be a small thing, but you've got to start small.

Start with what you know. The breath is going in. Do you know that? Yes, you know that. It's going out. Do you know that? Well, yes, you know that, too. Okay, know just that much. Don't forget that. Is it comfortable? You may not be sure. Could it be more comfortable? Well, experiment and see. Try to sensitize yourself to how the breathing feels. Without sensitivity, it all becomes mechanical, and when it becomes mechanical it becomes a chore. And when it becomes a chore the mind is going to start to rebel.

So, ask yourself, "What really feels good when you're breathing right now?" If you can't figure out what really feels good, just hold your breath for a while until the mind is screaming at you that you've got to breathe, you've got to breathe. Then when you breathe in, notice where it feels really good. Take that as your guide.

We in the West seem to be especially cut off from our own bodies. We're so much in our heads. The area of the body becomes unexplored territory, like those old maps from the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. They would show the coastlines of continents with huge blank areas in the interior. "Here Be Tigers," they'd say. Who knew what was in there! It's the same with the body. We know a little bit about it, but there are huge unexplored areas inside.

So we take as our beachhead this one point where we know the breath is coming in, we know the breath is going out. We know whether the breath is comfortable or not, and we begin to get a sense of what adjustments can be made to make it more comfortable so that it feels really good just breathing in right here, breathing out right here.

As for the other steps in the meditation, put them aside for the time being. Make sure you've got this step well under control. The people who try to take on too much at once are the ones who end up not mastering anything at all. Even if your progress is incremental, at least it's progress. You're building solidly, on a solid foundation. That's what matters. Otherwise the meditation is like a ladder that you lean up against a very unstable wall: You may be able to climb very high, but when the wall crumbles you're really going to be in bad straits.

Try to build step by step on what you really know. As for what you've heard about how the meditation is supposed to develop, or even if you've had experiences in the past where it's developed in interesting ways, put those aside for the time being. Don't let them clutter up your mind, because any progress in the meditation has to come from being very solidly in the present moment, fully focused on what you've got right here. If you've got a lot of expectations cluttering up your view, you're not going to see what you've got right here. Any progress that comes that way isn't genuine.

As Ajaan Lee says, "Be willing to be dumb about the meditation." Sometimes this is called "beginner's mind," but for me it's always been more effective to say, "Be dumb about it." There's so much you may have heard about the meditation, but how much do you really know? You know if the breath is coming in or going out; you know if your mind is with the breath or it's wandered off: Focus on being really clear about that, as continuously as possible. It's that state of continual clarity that actually develops the state of concentration you're looking for, the developed mindfulness you're hoping for.

It starts in these tiny steps. So whether the results come fast or slow, at least make sure you're getting the causes right. And they're simple: Be with the breath - all the way in, all the way out - *just this breath*.

If the breath is uncomfortable, you can adjust it. You're not required to breathe in a particular way. You're not required to be totally uninvolved with the breath. There has to be some involvement with the breath whether it's conscious or unconscious, so it might as well be conscious. You might as well learn to be sensitive to what's going on.

This simple exercise, if you allow it to do its work, will bring the results you want. In fact, it'll bring results better than you might expect. If you

clutter up your meditation with your expectations, that's all you get: things that seem to fit in with your expectations. If you allow the meditation to be a little more open-ended, it creates the possibility for other things to happen as well, many times better things, more genuine things.

So have faith in the process. If you have the causes right, the results have to come. Even if what you're doing right here seems to be a small thing, remember that all the great things in the world had to start out small.

Coastal redwoods come from the tiniest little seeds imaginable. Even though the seeds may be small, don't underestimate their potential. The spot where you're with the breath may seem to be a small thing, but as you get down into it you find that there's a lot there. In fact, the Buddha's teachings on causality have one big, consistent point: that whatever's happening in the universe, the basic pattern is something you can discern right here in the present moment. It's what in chaos theory they call "scale invariance." The patterns on the macro-scale are the same thing as on the micro-scale. Well, you've got the micro-scale right here.

On the macro-scale, you see that scientific theories keep changing, sometimes very fast. Many times they're not anything you can directly observe, because they're based on so many assumptions. But on the micro-scale—right here in the present moment, your mind with the breath—all the basic processes that you're going to need to know for Awakening are occurring. It's simply a matter of getting more and more sensitive right here. So, even though it may seem like a small spot, it's got a lot of potential.

It's like a kind of seed they have in Thailand. There's a particular plant whose seed has a diameter about that of a quarter. If you break the shell, stick it into about three gallons of water and come back a couple of hours later, you find that your three-gallon container is filled with what look like little vermicelli noodles. What was in the shell was just sitting there waiting to soak up water. This small spot in the present moment is like that. There's a lot to tease out in here, so don't be disdainful of its potential. Learn to start out small, and those small things are going to reward you.

Like that old fable of the mouse and the lion. The lion saved the mouse's life and later on the mouse was able to save the lion's life - even though the lion was originally pretty disdainful of what the mouse claimed it was going to be able to do. But it could. It could eat through that net.

So this little present moment that you've got right here: Don't step on it hoping that you're going to get someplace higher. Focus right here and really give it the space to open up. Whether it opens up slowly or quickly, that's not the issue. The issue is that you give it the space, you give it the time, you're patient and watchful enough to allow it to open.

When we say that big things grow from small things, it's not that they're going to grow in such a way that other people might notice. It's just a matter of whatever's there in the present moment becoming a lot clearer. The intricacies of what's going on become played out in a much larger perspective if you give them the time to develop.

So. Start out small. If you have to be small for a long time, that doesn't matter. What matters is that when the progress does come, it's solid.