



## Going Home

# Starting Out On The Path of Insight (Vipassana) Meditation

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### Going Home

Deep inside of us, we are already whole, already healthy, already exactly as we are supposed to be. We are each an inseparable part of a living, breathing universe.

We have difficulty seeing and feeling and touching and hearing this truth from years of being told and believing otherwise. Our vision has become clouded, our feelings dulled, our touch numbed, and our hearing faint. We no longer trust ourselves.

To cut through this illusion and return to our true nature, we need to simply direct our awareness inward. We need to sit in silence. By quieting our minds and opening our hearts, we can touch that place deep inside of us that is already whole.

Once we reconnect with this source of balance, our life begins to change. We begin to listen to ourselves with care and attention. We seek guidance from within and receive direction.

Once we reconnect with this place of inherent wisdom, we begin to trust ourselves. We begin to heal ourselves. We begin a journey back home.

### Starting At The Beginning Experiencing The Breath

The act of placing your attention on the breath, and keeping it there, doesn't sound too difficult. What could be so hard about shifting our 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 both an anchor to stabilize the energies in the mind and body and as an object of meditation.

Most who begin investigating Insight Meditation 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. You will experience frustration, confusion, and a sense of failure to the degree you have an idealized preconception 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 components of the meditation process.

### Connecting, Sustaining, Experiencing

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* the Qualities and Characteristics of the breath.

This initial meditation process involves repeating these simple steps over and over again, until connecting and sustaining the connection with the breath become a relaxed habit, and a natural process of experiencing, or experientially investigating, the Qualities and Characteristics of the breath. 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 begin to notice even subtle changes in the breathing process and, eventually, its clear interrelationship with bodily sensations, emotions, thoughts, speech, and conduct. This is the beginning of the process of discovery, which leads to transformation, then transcendence.

*Our objective during meditation 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 the moment 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 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.”

### **Experiencing The Qualities and Characteristics Of The Breath**

Sit comfortably erect with your feet on the ground. Fold your hands softly in your lap with the hands together, or place them on the knees. Find a position where your hips, shoulders, back, head, and neck are aligned. Allow the shoulders to move back and down, and the chest to open. Feel the full weight of your body in the chair. Feel the weight of your feet connecting with the ground. Once you have settled into this position, take a few deep, comfortable, rhythmic breaths.

Gently move the attention to the experience of breathing. Calmly investigate and determine where the experience of breathing is most clearly and strongly felt. In the rising and falling of the abdomen? Or at the tip of the nostrils as the air enters and is expelled? *Select one of these areas and allow the attention to focus here exclusively during your fifteen minute meditation session.*

What does it mean, from a meditative perspective, to experience the “Qualities” of the breath?

In any moment, there is a range of experiential sensations available to us in each breath. A description of a number of different ways you can experience the breath follows. Although each quality has two alternatives listed after it, these are for illustration only. The actual scope of what might be experienced involves a wide spectrum of sensations.

<i>Movement:</i>	Expansion or contraction
<i>Length:</i>	Long or short
<i>Depth:</i>	Deep or shallow
<i>Rhythm:</i>	Slow or fast
<i>Fluidity:</i>	Smooth or uneven
<i>Intensity:</i>	Strong or weak
<i>Temperature:</i>	Warm or cool

Notice whether there is a difference in these Qualities between the in breath and the out breath, the inhalation and the exhalation.

What does it mean, from a meditation perspective, to experience the “Characteristics” of the breath? In any moment, there are several dominant characteristics of the breath that are particularly important to notice from the perspective of seeing into and understanding the inherent characteristics of experience. These include:

The breath is a process which is in constant and on-going change.

The qualities and sensations of the breath flow from one into the other, rather than remaining separate, stable, and permanent.

The breath continues to happen on its own without the direction of the conscious mind and continues on its own regardless of our attention to it.

Notice that these characteristics, in contrast to the Qualities of the breath, do *not* change. These are the inherent characteristics of the breath, as well as all of our experience.

You can work with these Qualities and Characteristics during a sitting in two different ways. You might place the attention on the breath and focus on the most dominant Quality or Characteristic that emerges *from moment to moment* – a sense of expansion and contraction flows into the experience of the depth of the breath which flows into a sensation of temperature which flows into noticing that the breath is a process in constant movement. Or you might consciously focus the attention on a particular Quality or Characteristic and experience it more deeply – just staying with the sense of the length or rhythm of the breath or the process of change on a *moment-to-moment basis*.

*Experiment with these two approaches and see what happens.* Connect the attention with the in breath at the *earliest* point you can sense the in breath, then maintain the contact until the end of the in breath. Connect with the out breath at the *earliest* point you can sense the out breath, then maintain the contact until the end of the out breath. You may experience a gap or lull between the in and out breath, or you may experience the in breath flow into the out breath without a gap or lull.

With both approaches, you'll need to let go of control and relax into the experience that is presenting itself. Don't try to control or manipulate the breath in any way. Let it find its own natural rhythm. Just be present on a moment-to-moment basis for however you're experiencing the breath during a particular sitting or during a moment when you stop and connect with your breath during the day.

### **Noting - An Essential Tool Supporting Focused Attention and Experiential Understanding**

A helpful 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." As attention is placed and sustained on the breath, a gentle, silent descriptive note is made to describe what is happening. This involves perhaps ten 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 diminishes the degree to which attention is distracted. It supports the mind in understanding the process that is occurring.

This technique may, at first, seem awkward or cumbersome. This feeling will slowly begin to change as you become accustomed to, and familiar with, the noting 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.

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

You can count on this: Distractions will pull the attention off the breath. The mind will wander and become lost in thought, remembering, planning, or day-dreaming. 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 on 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 adverse 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.

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 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. These 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.

A poem by 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 return to the breath with kindness. A new start during meditation – and in our life – is only a breath away. Connect, sustain and experience.

### **The Importance of Thinking Small**

*Meditation is a process that is built on a foundation of small acts performed with care and attention.* Connect, sustain and experience. Note the Qualities and Characteristics of the breath. By bringing our attention to our experience in this precise way and being willing to experience our experience without judgment, we begin to develop a new habit of mind and heart. The act of engaging our experience in this seemingly small and inconsequential way begins to create a new *non-reactive relationship* with every thing we encounter – thoughts, emotions, confusion, uncertainty, troubling situations, difficult people. This, in turn, changes how we see, understand, and experience the rest of our lives.

The life of Helen Keller may be helpful in understanding this principle. Keller was born a deaf mute at a time when our society’s ability and willingness to identify and work with such profound disabilities was almost non-existent. She had the good fortune to collaborate with a young teacher who introduced Keller to a way of understanding her life and her world that began with smallest point of experience – what is this feeling in my hand?

*By attending to the smallest experiences of her life on a moment-to-moment basis, Keller demonstrated how small acts can transform an entire lifetime.* In later years, she

commented on this process in a way that seems particularly applicable to the process of meditation:

I long to accomplish a great and noble task, but it is my chief duty to accomplish small tasks as if they were great and noble.

### **Meditation In Daily Life**

You can also begin using this basic meditation process to inform your daily life and become more aware of how you’re feeling and the way you’re working. Several times during the day, stop for a moment, gently close your eyes, and follow your breath for two or three minutes. Bring your attention to the breath, then connect, sustain, and experience the breath in the same way as if you were doing sitting meditation. Just allow your body to relax into the rhythm of the breath. You might also try this same process, *but with your eyes open*, while you’re standing in line at the grocery store, waiting for a meeting to begin, between flights at the airport, or while you’re taking a break over a cup of coffee or tea.

With practice, our relationship with our breath can become an on-going source of moment to moment insight, self-knowledge, reassurance, and refuge. It is always with us, and it can become a constant friend. We can return to the rhythm of our breath at any time whether we are sitting, standing, lying down, or walking.

### **The Next Step – Closing Thoughts**

This booklet is designed to provide you with a practical start for beginning the practice of Insight Meditation. Learning how to experience the breath is the starting place, as well as the foundation, for everything that follows. The habits, skills, and attitudes you develop in working with the breath will later be expanded out to feelings, emotions, thoughts, actions, and relationships. If the process recommended in this booklet works for you, or peaks your interest, the next step might be enrolling in an introductory Insight Meditation course. There is no substitute for qualified instruction and guidance, and the support of meditating with others, to develop a sound and skillful meditation practice.

Thank you for your interest and may we all find a deep and lasting level of peace, satisfaction, and happiness in our lives.

