

Guided Meditation: The Craft of Mindfulness

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Hello, everyone, and welcome. This week, we're exploring the topic of *kusala*, the ancient Pāli word that, for today, I'll translate as skillful. I want to say that sometimes it's useful to think of meditation as a craft, a craft that you need to work on in order to develop the coordination, the dexterity, the skill, to be able to do it well and effortlessly, and maybe elegantly, beautifully.

And so, probably many of you have learned a skill of some type that took a while, took a lot of repetition, to slowly have things which are not exactly in your conscious control. Kind of slowly, the coordination, the dexterity, the strength, the movement, the fluidity, the muscular kind of subtlety of movements allows you to kind of do something very precisely and carefully that at first was awkward and difficult and maybe even uncoordinated. And you know that we have to repeat over and over again.

I think of someone who's a competitive swimmer. They do the same stroke over and over and over again a million times, but something inside, very, very subtly, is becoming more and more attuned to the efficiency of that stroke. Just the slightest little change in angles of the hand, the arm, the slightest little shift and change of position and of strength and of application and what muscles are and are not engaged, and at some point it gets phenomenally subtle.

The subtlety of sensing and sensation, the feedback loop between the sensory data that's coming in and something inside that knows how to adjust ever so slightly to make it more efficient or faster or better, is a phenomenally complex inner process. It is maybe more intuitive or more of a silent, absorbed attention than a figuring out.

So in meditation, we develop a skill, and we know that as a skill, as a craft, it takes a lot of repetition. And slowly, over time, the meditation changes. What I've seen in people who

have regular meditation practice is their body begins changing. They start developing a more yogic body, a body that somehow becomes adapted to a meditation posture. Some muscles get stronger. Some muscles, some places of tension, release, and more and more a person feels at home in this posture.

It's a balanced posture, an alert posture, and that crafting of the posture, slowly doing it over and over again, is the same thing with *mindfulness of breathing*. You know, a swimmer doesn't complain or get bored just because, "I've done three strokes now. That should be enough. I know how to do it." So the meditator has done three breaths. That's it. What's the big deal?

All the little mechanisms that are operating inside, all the different capacities or forms of attention we have, and distractions we have, and preoccupations and reactions we have, begin to come into focus or come into harmony. Something comes and gathers and gets settled, and very, very slowly, over many, many thousands of breaths, just coming back, being here, something begins shifting and changing. Until the time comes where it's effortless, or it just feels like we've arrived, like now, rather than we making the effort, the effort is making us.

So we're developing a skill. So sometimes that's useful to understand. Tomorrow I'll talk about how *kusala* can also be understood as something wholesome and healthy, and that has a different meaning and different understanding. But for now, for today: skillful.

So, to assume a meditation posture, the preparation of assuming the posture is actually quite important. We don't want to just plop down and take the first kind of relaxed posture we can. Sometimes you want to take as much as a minute to fine-tune the posture, to maybe rock forward and back, sideways, back and forth, to see if you can kind of find just the right balance points on your sitting bones, tailbone, to get your spine aligned. Taking time to adjust the hands so they're not an afterthought for meditation, but how you put your hands are in such a place it feels like they support attention.

Having your attention slowly move up the spine, making ever so small adjustments, so it feels like your spine is not an afterthought, but the spine is becoming aligned. The spine contains within it a certain relaxed intentionality to be present, to be involved in the craft of meditation. And then to adjust the head ever so slightly, the neck, the head, the position. Maybe tipping the head forward and back, from side to side, and see if there's a way the head can be positioned that gently feels supportive for being alert and present here.

And then gently closing the eyes, if they're not, and taking a few moments. Again, just like maybe an athlete might prepare themselves for the meet they're about to do, prepare your-

self by gentling yourself, gentling your awareness. Gentling the way that you will feel, or sense, or gaze upon your breathing. And then, with a gentle awareness, maybe a quiet awareness, prepare yourself to be with the breathing as you meditate.

Gently settle the attention into the part of the body where you normally attend to breathing, and still, as the preparation, gently, with awareness, refamiliarize yourself with the body's experience of breathing. The exact details of how breathing is done, the muscles engaged, what moves, varies from day to day, hour to hour. Refamiliarize yourself. Maybe like a sailor might become familiar with the wind and the currents, the conditions of the water before setting sail, and then only now begin *mindfulness of breathing*.

Each breath is like a stroke of a swimmer, or each breath is like the pedaling of a bicycle. Each stroke, each breath, is like a gentle wind that fills the sail of awareness that you keep open, wide, receptive to be lifted and carried, moved. And over and over again, the simple craft of *mindfulness of breathing*, in allowing the thinking mind, the distracted mind, to become quieter, so you can be absorbed in your craft, so you can be absorbed in all the details of the craft of meditation.

It helps you be absorbed in what you're doing, refined in what you're doing. So you find a deep peace with the absorption in *mindfulness of breathing*. With every breath, an opportunity for your body, your mind, your heart to continue cultivating the skill of meditation—a skill that comes mostly from showing up well for this breath, this moment.

And in these minutes that we've been meditating, have you in any way become calmer, more settled, more aware of your present-moment experience, more sensitive to it? Even if that means that you're distracted a lot or reactive a lot, or have a lot going on emotionally, is there more awareness or clarity around that? And if any shift like this has happened, how does that contribute to the simple skill of attending to your breathing?

Attending to your breathing gently, peacefully, like a swimmer attending to their strokes, a bicyclist attending to their pedaling, a woodworker attending to their sanding, the final sanding of what they built. And as we come to the end of the sitting, is there anything about the skill, mindfulness as a skill, and as a skill development, that you can bring into your everyday life? Maybe in the simple act of making breakfast, chopping vegetables, the simple act of cleaning around your home. How you drive—is there a skill of attention, a skill in being present mindfully, that you can enjoy developing in the ordinary activities of life?

And is there something about the skill of attention, the skill of mindful attending to what's in front of you, that supports you to be a better friend for others, for friends or strangers, that

you're kinder, more present, more caring, respectful? May it be that this practice of mindfulness supports us to be present for this world in a healthy way. May all beings be happy. May all beings be safe. May all beings be peaceful. May all beings be free. Thank you.