

Guided Meditation: The Backward Step

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Hello and welcome to this meditation session.

A few times in my life, I've been involved in doing something that was difficult, emotionally difficult. I had a friend kind of stand nearby, come close to me, kind of behind me a little bit, in a very appropriate way, and gently put their hand lightly on the back of my shoulder. What was being conveyed was the simple idea that I'm here with you, and I'm here to support you. It didn't take away the challenge, but it allowed me to stay in it without being quite so caught in it, so lost in it, or so preoccupied. There was a gentle kind of reminder: oh, there's a bigger world here. There's someone here supporting me.

So, in the same way, in meditation, one of the challenges of meditation is how much we're identified with our experience, how much we're in it. Some of that is so invisible because it's how we live our life, and we don't even know that it's possible to be any other way. But there is a possibility of taking a step or two back with our awareness and having that same relationship to ourselves as we meditate. Here, it's, "I'm here with you. I'm present for you. I'm not interfering with you, but I'm here, leaving you space, making room. I'm not identifying, fixing, changing. I'm here, stepping back."

So sometimes in Buddhism, there's the idea of taking the backward step, maybe a backward step or two with awareness, and being there with the overview, with the wider view, with the supportive view. I'm here with you, without being in the experience. So, if this makes sense for you, you might try this today in this meditation.

So, assume a meditation posture, and gently close the eyes. Without doing anything else, become familiar with how you are right now—in your body, your mind, your heart. Kind of a deep check-in, without any idea that for these next minute or two, you need to change anything.

And then, in the middle of how you are, all this check-in, become aware of how your body is breathing. Maybe as a continuation of the check-in, not shifting the breath or changing it, just checking in. How is it to be breathing in the midst of how you are? Where is the breathing in the body most predominant? Where are the biggest movements, the strongest sensations of breathing? And how are the sensations of breathing received, registered by the body itself? How are they sensed by the body, distinct from what you're trying to do with your awareness and the mind?

Maybe breathing is like a gentle wave or stroking that is reassuring for your whole being. Maybe not where the breathing is controlled, but beyond the edges of where there's any kind of effort made to breathe—just the edges of breathing touching your body, your feelings, your mind. Where the exhale is an occasion to gently quiet and soften your thinking mind, letting the thoughts kind of settle deeper into the body, dissolving into the body.

And there too, maybe not the ways in which you are participating in thinking, but maybe the edges of thinking can dissolve with the exhale. And maybe the edges of your awareness, of your mindfulness, as you exhale, can also soften, open, spread. And then, taking the backward step one or two with awareness, to be there and not in the middle of all things.

Awareness as the supportive attention that's there with its hand gently on your shoulders of experience. That is with how you are awake, aware, present, without identifying with anything. Maybe behind you, maybe just behind and up above, having a wide overview, as the breathing spreads its gentle rhythm through your body and this spacious awareness stands behind you, holding it all. Nothing needs to change, and everything is allowed to change in its own time.

Oh. Oh.

And as we come to the end of this sitting, is there another way that you can gently take the backward step—not to deny anything or abandon anything—but that backward step to have a panoramic view of all who you are? Without trying hard for it to be panoramic, just broad, wide, carrying attention that you're here to be with yourself, here in the present moment, without a lot of thinking about it, a soft, wide awareness.

And with this backward step, gazing on yourself, let that gaze—soft gaze, peaceful gaze—now move forward beyond yourself, so that your gaze is out in the direction of the rest of the world, widespread out. Nothing particular needs to come in mind about the world. Just gazing outwards across the lands in your direction. Gazing upon the world kindly. Gazing upon the world softly. Gazing upon the world from a place of safety, for these few moments here.

Gazing from behind all the challenges that your mind might awaken. That backward step that gazes through it all. This wide, spacious, soft awareness, including everyone in your gaze, including yourself. Wishing everyone well. May all beings be happy. May all beings be safe. May all beings be peaceful. May all beings be free, and may the way I gaze upon the world contribute to my own happiness, safety, peace, and freedom. May I gaze upon this life in peace.

Thank you.