

You Don't Have to Suffer

December 27, 2017

Focus on your breath.

Remind yourself there's nowhere else you have to go right now and nothing else you have to do. This is your only responsibility: looking after your own mind. This is your primary responsibility anyhow. But all too often, we let the duties of the world take first place, and the mind gets shoved back into the background. So here's your opportunity to give the mind the attention it deserves.

After all, it is the source of your pleasure and pain in life. So you want to make sure that it's producing pleasure, not producing pain. There are pains that come from your past actions, but you don't have to create mental suffering around them right now. This is where we're free.

When the Buddha taught the end of suffering, he didn't say, "I'll teach the end of suffering only to people who don't deserve to suffer." No matter how much you've done in the past to create unskillful actions, you don't have to suffer from them. That's the message.

So find a sense of well-being in the present. There has to be some place in the body that can be pleasant. If every part of the body were in pain right now, you'd die. So there's some pleasure somewhere right here. Make the most of it.

As for the pains, use those as objects, as things you want to understand. Why does physical pain lead to mental suffering? When the mind thinks thoughts that would make it suffer, why does it latch onto them? Instead of just sitting there being victimized by these things, learn to be curious about them, inquisitive. Investigate.

When you take the initiative like this, you're not just a sitting target. Pains don't hit you with quite the same force. Now you're engaged in an exploration, and not just sitting there receiving the blows of your past actions. You're probing, you're trying to find out what's going on. And as you move around like this, probing and asking questions, you're not the sitting target you used to be.

So in this way, you take a more active approach to the present moment. After all, you're already shaping a lot of the present moment with your present intentions. So just be very clear about what those intentions are.

This is why we stay with the breath, because the breath is the closest thing in the body that there is to the mind, and it's the most responsive to the mind. When there's a little change in the mind, then the breath will change immediately. But the influence can work the other way around as well: Calm the breath, soothe the breath, and the mind gets soothed as well. It's in a better position to take on the initiative in a skillful way, because it has a foundation of strength, a foundation of well-being on which it can rest, on which it can base its inquiry.

So get to know your mind in the present moment, because that's where all the important things in the world are happening. You look on the Internet, you look on TV, you listen to the media, and it's all something someone else is doing right now: That's what they say is important. But you have to remember that the shape of your mind, the state of your mind is something that will survive even this body, your experience of this world. So, the mind is more important than the world around you. Always keep that sense of priorities in mind.