

Giving Ballast to the Mind

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One of the Buddha's many talents as a teacher was his ability to find apt similes for things. In the Pali Canon, there are all kinds of similes dealing with the skills of soldiers, the skills of cooks, similes drawn from plants, from animals—and they're all very apt. But, he said at one point, there is one thing that's really hard to find a simile for, and that's the quickness with which an untrained mind can reverse direction.

Here's the main factor in our lives, the factor that shapes our thoughts, our words, and deeds, and through our thoughts, words, and deeds shapes the pleasures and pains we experience, yet it can turn on us in an instant. It can turn from peaceful to enraged, inflamed, and lustful. Things you used to believe, suddenly your drop. Standards you used to hold by, you abandon. And it all happens very quickly. So this is one of the big problems in our lives: We can't really trust our own minds, especially when we're put into difficulties. We may be good and upright moral people, but all of a sudden, poverty hits, war hits, and we can turn into animals.

But if we find a happiness that's solid and dependable, we can turn our minds into something solid and dependable. We have principles, we have values that we really hold to no matter what. This is why we have to train the mind, because it's when it's really well trained that you can depend on it. So find something to give the mind ballast, not for the purpose of burdening it, but for making sure that it doesn't fly away fast. And because the mind is so finicky, you've got to give it something it likes so that it doesn't resist the training.

This is one of the reasons why we focus on the breath, because the breath is something you can adjust. You can change it to make it comfortable. And the breath has an influence in the whole body. The way you breathe has an influence on what you experience. Your head, your shoulders, your arms, your legs, your back, your abdomen—all the parts of the body are affected by the way you breathe. If you make the breath comfortable, as the Buddha said, you can develop a sense of ease and rapture that you can permeate and spread to fill the whole body. Then it's a lot easier for the mind to stay still. And when it can stay still, you can begin to trust it a little bit more.

So focus on the sensation of the breathing. Where do you feel the breathing right now? Put aside your preconceived notions of where the air comes in and out

of the nostrils. Just ask yourself, this process of breathing, the expansion and contraction of the muscles, of the rib cage, the diaphragm, and then indirectly from those to other parts of the body: Where do you really feel it? Where does the breath seem to begin? That impulse to have the in-breath: Where does it begin? Is it comfortable? Does it feel tight and constricted? If it does, you can try to think of it being ventilated a little bit more. Wherever there seems to be a shield or shell around the body, think of it dissolving, so that the breath can come in and out of the body from any direction. And it feels refreshing, nourishing.

When you get tired of a particular rhythm of breathing, you can change. Keep this up: What does the body want right now? What feels good right now? Of course, the body doesn't really want anything, it's the mind. What would feel good right now to the mind? Which part of the body would you like to satisfy with a comfortable breath? Go through the body section by section, and become sensitive to what that particular part of the body needs in terms of breath energy coming in and going out. How do you bring it in so that it feels good and gratifying? How do you let it go out so that you don't feel as if you're squeezing it or constricting it? Think of all the little muscles in your blood vessels relaxing, and let the breath come in to this relaxed body. And if it's going to go out, it can go out on its own. You don't have to squeeze it out.

Focus on the parts the body you can make comfortable. There will be pains in some parts of the body—there may be pains in your legs, pains in your back—but you don't have to focus on them. Focus on the comfortable parts.

And do your best to stick with them. The more continuous your gaze, then the more refined the sense of pleasure, the more gratifying the sense of pleasure becomes. Any part of the body that feels gratifying, think of that very pleasant feeling spreading whatever it can go in the body, like mercury. It's slipping around all kinds of places.

In other words, do your best to make the breath really absorbing. Here it is, the energy flow in the body that's been keeping us alive ever since we were born. And here's our opportunity to really get to know it and to maximize its potential for pleasure, making that pleasure as continuous as possible. The more continuous the sense of pleasure of the body, the more easily the mind will stay focused continually. It'll be less and less inclined to want to change.

To teach it the habits that it needs in order to be reliable, you have to stick with something. Train the mind to be continuous in its gaze, continuous in its attention, continuous in its focus, so that if it's going to move, you'll know the fact that it's moving. All too often, the mind moves in such way that we can't keep track of it. You seem to be with the breath, then all of a sudden you find yourself

someplace else, over in Alaska, over in Africa, Europe, out to Mars, down with the penguins in Antarctica. You can go all kinds of places very quickly—so quickly that as the Buddha said, there's no adequate simile for it.

But when you get it trained, you see these movements happening, because your attention gets quicker, your mindfulness, your alertness become quicker. You catch the mind in the act, and you can bring it back.

This is how you learn how to trust the mind. You get quicker than it is. In other words, the skillful qualities of attention, alertness, and mindfulness get quicker than the fabrications of the mind. In that way, you can begin to have some control over your thoughts. This is what it means to train the mind. It can't pull any fast ones on you. And when it can't pull any fast ones on you, that's when you can begin to trust it.

So be as alert as you can to whatever is going on in the body, and how the mind reacts to that. Learn how to get the body and mind both in a permeable state, so they can stay together, they get absorbed into each other, so that your mindfulness is immersed in the body, and the body is saturated with your awareness. This is what gives the mind ballast, gives it an anchor here in the present moment. Again, it's not a sense of weightiness that's burdensome. It gives it heft, gives it solidity, so that when it goes, it lets you know. When it comes back, it lets you know.

This is an important step in getting the mind into a position where we can really trust it. When you can trust the mind, that takes care of all the real dangers in life. If this factor of life is trustworthy, then you can have some sense of confidence that you've got a happiness you can depend on.