

Control

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There are so many things in life over which you have no control. Even your own body: You can't tell it to stay young forever, you can't tell it to stay healthy forever, and you can't tell it to live forever. It's just not going to do that—to say nothing of things outside. The people we love, the people we cherish, can suddenly go without saying good-bye, without any closure. This is the common way of the world.

Even our own minds: There's lots of stuff that keeps popping up in the mind. It comes from past actions, and you can't go back and undo your past actions. So you have to live with things popping up. But you have the choice in the present moment as to what you're going to focus on. And in the focusing, you make things grow.

So the question is: What are you going to make grow in your mind? You could spend your time obsessing about things you can't control, but what does that foster? What does that make grow? It fosters frustration, disappointment. Do you really want to foster those things in your mind? When you have the choice, you could foster things that are actually useful. There is this element of choice in the present moment. And as we meditate, this is what we're focusing on. The element of choice lies in this intention: What are you going to focus on to make grow?

You can make mindfulness grow. You can make concentration, discernment, all kinds of good qualities grow. It's up to you.

Meditation is devoted to gaining practice in focusing on the right things. Right now, here in this body and mind, you do have the potential for developing concentration and mindfulness. You've got the breath coming in and out. You've got this mind that thinks and is aware. So focus on making those grow—in other words, developing the good potentials that lie here. Think about the breath and be aware of the breath. Put these things together. It's like taking a seed and putting it together with soil, water, and sunlight. When these things get put together, the seed can grow. If the seed is sealed off in a little plastic bag someplace, the water is someplace else, the soil is someplace else, the sun is someplace else, the seed won't grow. But if you put them all together, then things grow.

So this is what you want to develop: the potential for a sense of well-being with the breath. The mind needs a good place to stay in the present moment, if it's going to stay here and really be alert to what's going on. So focus on how the breathing feels. What kind of breathing feels good right now? It could be long

breathing or short, or long in and short out, or short in and long out, or deep or shallow, heavy, light, or someplace in between all these things. There is a potential for real comfort in the breathing, but you have to pay attention if you're going to see it.

This is what you want to make grow: a good foundation here for the mind to stay in the present moment, for the body and the mind to feel on good terms with each other. Think of the breathing is a whole-body process. Which parts the body do you tend to tense up when you breathe in? To what extent are you adding a lot of unnecessary tension to the process? If you notice any tension in the body, think of it dissolving away with the out-breath. Then when the new in-breath comes in, you don't have to tense up again. Some people find this disorienting, because they're used to breathing in a particular way, holding the body in a particular way, tensing up the body in a particular way, when the breath comes in. When they're not doing that, it feels strange.

But explore that possibility for a while. Breathing doesn't have to be a tense process. And you don't have to identify with a particular way of tensing the body. This is just one more unnecessary thing you're adding to the present moment. There is so much in life where we add unnecessary pain, unnecessary suffering on top of the stuff that's already there. And it turns out that the unnecessary pain, the unnecessary suffering or stress, is what really has a big effect on the mind. We tend to latch on to these things. When we latch on to them, we trap ourselves.

This is why the image of fire is so predominant in the Buddha's teachings. There was a belief in his day that fire burns because it latches on to its fuel. And when it's latched on to its fuel, it's trapped. The fuel doesn't trap it. It traps itself in the fuel by holding on. When the fire goes out, it's because it lets go. Then it's freed.

The same principle applies to the mind. We trap ourselves in these things because we hold on to them. When you learn how to let go, sometimes you have to deal with a sense of its feeling really strange, because you've been holding on for so long, that when you let go, it feels very unusual, almost threatening, because you thought you had control over things by the way you held on. But it was probably an unskillful sense of control. When you learn how to let go, and keep letting go, that's when you begin to free the mind from a lot of the unnecessary suffering it causes for itself.

The Buddha gives the analogy of a person being shot with an arrow. The simple fact of having a body, the fact that it's going to grow ill, it's going to get old, it's going to die, and just the simple pain of having a body: The Buddha says that's like being shot with one arrow. But then on top of that, we get all worked up around

it. That's the second arrow. Or you might want to say it's not just a second arrow, it's a whole slew of arrows that you shoot yourself with, over and over and over again. The second and third and fourth and fifth arrow: Those are the ones that really hurt. Often we shoot ourselves with those arrows because we're trying to control the situation in a really unskillful way.

So notice where you're adding unnecessary stress, where you're fostering the conditions where unnecessary stress and suffering will grow. Then notice how you don't have to do that.

A simple place to watch this is with the breath: the way you tense up around the breath, your idea of what you have to do in order to make the breath come in. Actually you don't have to do anything at all. The breath is going to come in and out on its own. If you had to do the breathing all the time, then as soon as you forgot about the breath and were thinking about something else, you'd die. But it doesn't happen that way. The breath just goes on automatic pilot, and you're free to think of other things. Yet when you're sitting here focusing on the breath, you feel that you've got to do the controlling. You've got to tense up here, force it here, pull it in there.

This is a primary example of all the unnecessary suffering we cause for ourselves in life when we try to control things in an unskillful way. So try to drop that sense of control and observe what really works, what does create a sense of ease in the present moment: what kind of control is skillful, what kind of intentions help. Sometimes what you need is an intention just to watch. Other times, you need an intention to adjust things a little bit here, a little bit there. But you test the issue by seeing what creates stress and what doesn't. In this way, you learn. Your control comes from knowledge and not from ignorance, not from craving. That makes all the difference in the world.

So learn to be more discerning in what you look for in the present moment. Sometimes it seems that there's nothing at all you can control. Well, that's a misperception. Other times, you feel you've got to have everything under control. That's a misperception as well. Be more discerning about what can you control, what lies outside your control. You learn this by experimenting. And a good place to start is right here with the breath. There's a lot to learn from just focusing on the process of breathing, because it teaches you a lot about how the mind reacts to other processes as well, how it gets involved and tries to control other processes, too.

So the breath is not only a good place to settle and focus your attention so the mind can settle down and be still, but it's also good laboratory for learning about the mind. To learn what kind of intentions are helpful, what kind of intentions

are not, what kind of intentions lead to your trapping yourself in a particular state of mind, and what kind of intentions help free you, this is the place to learn.

Once you understand the process of what the Buddha calls fabrication, the intentional actions around the breath, that sharpens your sensitivity, so that you begin to see other kinds of fabrication as well, particularly in the way the mind talks to itself, the feelings and perceptions that it creates in the present moment. Some of these are the results of past actions, but a lot of them come from your present intentions. But to see that, you have to pay careful attention to what's going on. The breath is a good place to take as your foundation. As long as you're with the breath, you know you're in the present moment.

The longer you stay here, the more you get familiar with the present moment. Then you begin to see the possibilities here. In one of his discourses, the Buddha says there's a potential for rapture here in the present moment, just in the sensations in the body, if you allow them to be for a while without your interfering with them too much. This doesn't mean that you just let them go their own way. You make up your mind to stop your old habits of squeezing this and squeezing that in order to get the breath to come in and go out. You can maintain that intention long enough so that the body develops a sense of fullness. The potential is there. You've got to figure out exactly how to relate to the breath in such a way as to allow those potentials to grow. That makes it even easier to stay in the present moment, because if you feel full and nourished here, the mind won't be hungry. It won't go running out looking for scraps, hoping to find happiness in things over which it has no control at all, and getting run over in the process.

So spend some time familiarizing yourself with what you've got right here. There are lots of good potentials, there are lots of stressful potentials here. So through trial and error, learn which is which. This way, you gain a greater and greater sensitivity for things over which you really do have some control, because you're looking carefully in the right place.