

Wisdom & Compassion

January 21, 2007

Meditation is medicine for the mind, medicine for the heart. It's an opportunity to put down all your thoughts and concerns, and let the mind be treated in a healing way. One good way of getting out of mind's concerns is to focus on how the body feels right now.

Before you focus on the breath, you might want to go through the body and relax it. Starting with the tips of your fingers, relax them, then move up the fingers, joint by joint, through the palms of the hands, your wrists, your forearms, your elbows, up the arms to the shoulders, relaxing any tension you may feel there. Then you start with your toes, move on up through the feet, the legs, the pelvis, up the back, the neck, the head. Go through the body very slowly and let things relax. When the body relaxes like this, it's easier to settle into the present moment. If there's not a sense of ease, it's hard to stay here. When the mind is feeling burdened, when it's feeling assaulted by all the events of the world, this is one way of giving it a chance to find someplace else to focus.

Right here, all you have is the functioning of the body. And allow the breath to be comfortable, because the breath is the main function of the body that has an influence over the other ones. It's basically the point where the mind and the body meet. Breathe in a way that's good for the body, good for the mind. Think of the breath surrounding you on all sides. It's not just the air coming in and out through the nose, it's the whole energy circulation around the head, around the body, down through the head, through the body, all around. Open up to that flow. What you want is a combination of opening up and allowing it to be comfortable. The two help each other along. The more comfortable it is, the easier it is to open up, the more you can open up.

And just give yourself to that comfortable sensation. It's healing and it takes time. It's like a cream you rub on a rash. It's not the case that as soon as the cream gets on the rash, the rash will disappear. And you can't just rub the cream on and then rub it off and hope that the rash will go away. You have to let the cream stay there with the rash for quite a while, and bit by bit by bit, it'll do its healing work. It's the same with the breath. Allow the mind to stay with the sensation of the breath, and don't be too impatient to see results.

When you allow the mind to stay here this way, it strengthens the mind. And it also gives the mind new habits. After all, the suffering that we encounter in the course of our lives is not just from things come from outside. It's mainly from how

the mind processes these things, how it reacts to them—the worlds of suffering it builds inside. And it turns out that those worlds are the most oppressive, the most burdensome.

That's both one of the major difficulties being a human being but it also shows that there's hope. If suffering were simply a matter of the things that come in at us, we'd have no control, there would be no escape. But because it's based on things that we do, the way we react, the way we shape our inner worlds, we can change. We can change our intentions; we can change our understanding of what we're doing, and that will alleviate our suffering. So even though the world outside may still have a lot of harsh events, we don't have to add to the harshness, we don't have to add the suffering and misery. The mind can learn how to heal itself.

That's where freedom lies—as the Buddha called it, the ultimate freedom from disease. This is what wisdom is all about. Sometimes we think of Buddha's wisdom as very abstract and intellectual, but in its original form, that wasn't the case at all. It was devoted specifically to this problem: the fact that everybody suffers, and yet we don't have to. The question is, how to put an end to that suffering. Even though we live in a human world that's full of all kinds of ups and downs, brightness and darkness, coming together, going apart, it's still possible for the mind to live in this world in a way that it doesn't have to suffer, doesn't have to be burdened. The work we do in this direction as we meditate, which is both work of the heart and the mind, is the most important work there is.

It's interesting that in the different Buddhist cultures, they don't make a clear distinction between heart and mind. They use the words interchangeably. It's important to think about this. We tend to think of the mind as the calculating side, and the heart as the emotional side, and they seem to be going in different directions. But if they do go in different directions, we're in trouble. Yet if you can learn how to bring them together, develop the qualities of wisdom and discernment on the one hand, and goodwill and compassion on the other, and develop them together, that's when you begin to see the power of the mind in being able to put an end to suffering, doing the most important thing it can do.

The Buddha's wisdom begins with goodwill: the desire for happiness, in the midst of all the suffering in the world. If this weren't the case, the Buddha wouldn't have focused on the four noble truths as his main teaching. The truths are an understanding of suffering, how to let go of its cause, the path you have to develop in order to let go of that cause, and then the results that come: the end of suffering. If the Buddha weren't concerned about the issue of happiness—that's what goodwill is, it's the wish for happiness—then he wouldn't have focused on this issue. He would have focused someplace else.

So the wisdom is based on goodwill and compassion. And goodwill and compassion are based on wisdom. You begin to realize that if you want happiness, the best kind of happiness to want is a happiness that lasts, that's not subject to all the ups and downs of the world—aging, illness, death, separation. The realization that there has to be something you can do about this: That, as the Buddha said, is the beginning of wisdom. So the two go together. Wisdom depends on goodwill and compassion; goodwill and compassion depend on wisdom.

And this doesn't apply just in the beginning stages. You can have lots of compassion, but if there's no wisdom, it's not necessarily a cause for an end of suffering. It actually can pull you in the other direction. So you to learn how to train your compassion, train your desire for happiness—both for yourself and for other people—by being observant. This is why we work on the meditation to make the mind more alert, more mindful, and more observant in seeing what works and what doesn't work, seeing clearly what cause and effect do, which actions really do lead to an alleviation of suffering, and which ones you thought might do but don't.

At the same time, you need a way to embody your wisdom. This is what the breath is for. Learning to get on good terms with the breath, learning how to be immersed in the breath, gives an immediate sense of well-being. Once there's a sense of well-being at least on this level, then it's a lot easier to do the hard work of being observant. Learning to abandon the unskillful habits we have, how to develop skillful ones, takes energy. But if you can come from this sense of being at ease with the breath, allowing the breath to soothe and fill the body, you're coming from a much stronger place, so that you can do and say and think the things you know are right.

All too often, we know what the right and skillful thing might be to do, but we just don't have the energy. It seems beyond us. But when you can strengthen yourself through the breath this way, through developing concentration and mindfulness and alertness, you're in a much better position.

So wisdom and compassion or discernment and goodwill go together like this, they help each other along. You need wise strategies to develop a sense of well-being in the mind. It doesn't just come on its own. Sometimes we hear the Buddha talking of human beings as being basically good or basically wise, but he doesn't say anything in those terms. He doesn't say that we're basically anything at all, but he does say that we can develop skillful actions, or if we want, we can act in unskillful ways. It's our choice, simply that it makes a lot more sense to act in a skillful way, to try to develop all the good qualities of the mind for the sake of this purpose: healing the suffering that's so unnecessary but is so prevalent all over.

This takes work, which is why we require strategies, like meditation. It's a simple thing, focusing on the breath. It may not be easy, but it's basically a simple process. What makes it hard is the question of putting in enough time, using your powers of observation, to get the most out of it. That's why it requires effort, but the effort is well spent. After all, the breath is the most basic force that keeps the mind and the body together.

There's one point where the Buddha states that if you breathe in ignorance, it's contributing to more suffering. So there's something very simple you can do to alleviate that suffering: Learn to breathe with awareness, breathe with knowledge, fully aware all around, with breath coming in through all the body, going out through all the body, allowing yourself to be bathed in it, soothed by it. Let it be a healing breath, a medicinal breath. And that's both a wise and a compassionate thing to do.