

Ironies

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Meditating on the breath starts with two activities: One is thinking about the breath, and the other is actually watching the breath as it comes in and goes out. When you think about the breath, you don't just think once. You keep on thinking about it. In other words, you have to be mindful.

“Mindful” means keeping something in mind. In this case, remember to stay with the breath, that this is going to be your frame of reference, it's going to be the theme of your meditation. You've got to keep reminding yourself to do that, because the mind so easily forgets. Its habit is to focus on something for a little while and then to focus on something else. It very easily slips from one thought to another. So part of the training here requires that you keep remembering: Stay with the breath, stay with the breath. Keep that thought in mind.

As for watching the breath, in the beginning it's pretty simple: Just watch it coming in and out. This is called alertness: You're alert to what you're doing. Know when you're breathing in, know when you're breathing out. And try to know whether the breath is comfortable. If it's not comfortable, you can change it.

This is where another quality comes in and builds on top of the alertness you're trying to develop here. That's evaluation: trying figure out what kind of breathing feels good. We may think it's strange to be analyzing in the meditation, when we're often taught that meditation means not analyzing, but that's not the case. You have to evaluate. You have to provide the mind with a comfortable place to stay. Otherwise, it's not going to stay. It's going to go wandering off, looking for comfort someplace else. The most convenient way of making your body more comfortable right now is to adjust the breath, to play with the breath, to experiment with the breath, to see what feels good and what doesn't. You're trying to sensitize yourself here to something that ordinarily we're not very sensitive to.

This is one of the many ironies in life: Things that are right next to us, right inside us, we often don't know. We're distracted by things outside. As it happens, the further you get away outside, the less certain things become. Yet those are the things we seem to be most interested in. We miss what's happening right inside us, right next to the mind.

So change your focal point. Bring it right here. There are lots of ins and outs to the breath. You can make it longer, shorter, deeper, more shallow, heavier, lighter, faster, slower. And you don't have to exert physical pressure for this to happen. Just think: "Next breath, a little longer," and the body will breathe a little bit longer. Watch it for a while. Does that feel good? If not, try shorter, deeper, more shallow. At the same time, notice what mental picture you have of breathing. We often have some cartoon ideas of how the body breathes. But it's a very subtle process involving the entire nervous system. The whole nervous system gets involved in the energy flow.

If you allow for that thought, it changes the quality of the breath. It goes deeper inside. Parts of the body that you might have shut off from the breathing process get allowed back in. This then allows for a larger sense of ease to come from the breathing, which makes it easier to settle down.

This is just one of the ironies in the practice: the irony that some things so near to us can do so much good for us, but they're things we tend to overlook. So our attention has to be pointed back. This is a theme that goes throughout our lives. We want happiness and yet we so often do things that cause suffering. We don't even realize that we're the ones who are causing the suffering, partly because we're interested in other things, and partly because we're not very alert, not very mindful. We don't see the connections between our actions and their results.

This why we need to be taught. You would think that, when we're suffering, we would know why, but we don't often. The "why" is the hardest part, but many times even the actual suffering itself is something we miss. It's like someone who's used to living in a city and has gotten to the point where he doesn't even hear the traffic noises. They become so much a constant part of his life that he shuts them out. When we take a person like that out into the countryside, where there's no traffic, that's when he realizes he's been putting up with an awful lot of din.

This is a lot of what the practice is about, helping you realize that a lot of the suffering that you carry around, a lot of the tension you carry around, is really unnecessary, doesn't have to be there. It points you to the fact that you actually are carrying it around.

There's so much in life that we take for granted, in the sense of a certain level of stress, a certain level of suffering, dis-ease. We regard it as normal, and it *is* normal in the sense that it's a consistent part of our life. But it doesn't have to be there. As we go deeper, there's the whole issue of the relationship between cause and effect. Often the things we do to create suffering will cause an immediate sense of weight or disease, but they also cause longer-term problems. We rarely see

the connection between something we did in the past and what we're experiencing now.

So again, this is why we need the teaching of the Buddha. There was one point where Ven. Ananda came to see the Buddha and said, "This dependent co-arising you're teaching seems complex but it's really just as clear as clear can be." And the Buddha said, "No, don't say that. It really is complex. It's tangled, like a bird's nest or a tangled skein in a loom." In other words, the causes that go into our suffering really are very complex. Some come from the past; some come from the present. Even the way you breathe, if you breathe in an ignorant way, the Buddha said, contributes to your suffering. The way you relate to pleasure and pain, if it's done in ignorance, contributes to your suffering. The things you pay attention to, if you do it out of ignorance, contribute to your suffering. There are lots of causes, so many that it's hard to know where to begin.

So again, even though when the Buddha teaches the basic principles of the teaching, the four noble truths—suffering, the cause, the cessation of suffering, and the path to the end of suffering—these are things that can be immediately present, but we need somebody to point them out to us, because we keep missing them. Even though the Buddha's teaching is about something you can see, and ultimately you do become the judge of whether the teaching is working or not based on your sensitivity to how your actions are leading to suffering or to the end of suffering, still you need pointers to begin with: where to look, what to do in order to see clearly, how to be a good judge of how your actions are going.

Take, for instance, the Buddha's teachings on stress and suffering. They're all things that are immediately evident, immediately apparent, but we tend to miss them. Some of the things we all know—there is stress in birth, there is stress in aging, illness, and death, getting what you don't want, not getting what you do want—but the summary is something subtler, the clinging-aggregates: clinging to form, to feeling, perception, thought constructs, consciousness. This is what it all comes down to. Again, it's stuff that's happening all the time in the present moment, but we tend to miss it.

So we need to develop our powers of mindfulness and alertness to see these connections and to understand our duty toward suffering, which is to comprehend it—something we have a lot of trouble doing. Why? Because we tend to push it away or to run away from it. We're like a parent with a difficult child. We don't want to be bothered, so we push the child away, and of course that just creates more problems. We have to take the time to really look into why the child behaves this way. That takes patience and it takes endurance. And patience and endurance are things that are often hard to come by.

The same with our own suffering: We'd just rather be rid of it. We don't want to do the work of sitting down and learning how to understand it. But the only way you can be rid of it is to understand it.

This is why we develop these practices of mindfulness and alertness leading to concentration, because concentration does give us a sense of ease, a sense of solidity and stability that makes it easier for us to be enduring and patient. We're trying to develop a sense of well-being that we can tap into when we need it that helps us to endure, so that we're not constantly obsessed with the idea that we're having to put up with something difficult.

So the practice involves learning how to see that the duties with regard to the end of suffering are twofold. One is to let go of craving, and the other is to be aware of it as we're letting it go. In other words, we have to develop the qualities that allow us to see more clearly and to let go of the qualities that get in the way, because it's our craving for things to be a particular way that gets in the way of seeing how things actually are.

These are some of the duties coming from the noble truths. They help us understand why we suffer from these ironies: the irony of the fact that everything we do, we do for the sake of happiness, but we often end up causing pain; and the irony of the fact that the way out of that unskillful behavior is to look very carefully at the things we're doing—things that should be immediately apparent, and yet we have to be taught how to look. We need someone to point out the way.

That's what the Buddha does: He points the way and says, in effect, "Look, this is where you look, right here, and this is *how* you look: You try to comprehend the suffering. You try to abandon the cause. And while you're abandoning it, you try to be alert to what you're doing as you're abandoning, and you develop qualities of the mind that make it easier to be alert while you're abandoning things. You have to develop qualities like mindfulness and concentration."

Many of these duties go against the grain, because we have our own ideas of how to deal with suffering, but when and where did we pick up those ideas? We picked them up when we were little kids before we even knew how to talk. The pain of birth, the pain of just being hungry, the pain of all kinds of things: We didn't understand, so we developed an intuitive reaction to pain that we've carried around in our bones ever since. We have to unlearn that.

So even though pain is there, as the chant we recited just now said, often we don't discern it, we don't really see it for what it is. We're more interested in how to push it away or how to go for some pleasure in its place. The problem is that we take pain and pleasure as ends in themselves: pain as an end that you want to avoid, pleasure as an end you want to go for. But the Buddha says learn how to use

them as means. The better you understand suffering, the more you'll be able to go past it. The more you use the pleasure of meditation as a path, the closer you get to a pleasure and ease that's even greater. But using pleasure as the path means not that you just go for it. It means that once the mind has a sense of ease, you try to use that ease to develop the patience and endurance you need to comprehend what the mind is doing to create suffering.

This means that all these duties work together, so that we can finally, at some point at least, free ourselves from these ironies so that we can will for our well-being and actually produce well-being. We'll be in a position where we can see whether what we're doing is working or not, because we've learned how to sensitize ourselves to the suffering we're carrying around. We learn how to sensitize ourselves to the relationship between our actions and their results. In the beginning, we require someone to point these things out to us, but once we get the message, then it's up to us to put ourselves in a position where we really can be our own judges as to what's working and what's not.

Ajaan Lee's example is of someone buying himself out of slavery. At first, you're a slave to your emotions—a slave to your greed, anger, and delusion—but you also have this way of developing your own inner wealth, the wealth of mindfulness, the wealth of concentration, the wealth of discernment. And through that wealth, you can buy yourself out of slavery. That requires patience, requires dedication, the kind of patience and dedication we may not feel we have in the beginning, but they can be developed if you bring the proper attitude, if you bring the willingness to learn.