

Ardency

March 9, 2007

Notice where you feel the breath, and stay focused on those sensations, the sensations that tell you now the breath is coming in, now the breath is going out. Stick with them. Keep watching them. The Pali term for this *anupassana*, which literally means “following and looking.” In other words, you keep track of the breath to see what’s going to happen. The more consistently you keep track, the more you’re going to see.

Now, to keep track requires three qualities. One is mindfulness, the ability to keep something in mind. In this case you’re keeping the breath in mind.

The second quality is alertness, which means being clearly aware of what you’re doing. In other words, when you’re with the breath, you know; when you’re not with the breath, you know. And you also know what the breath is doing. Is it coming in? Is it going out? How does it feel? That’s the duty of alertness.

Finally, there’s a quality called ardency. Ardency is the effort to do this as skillfully as possible.

Lying behind all this is a quality called appropriate attention. This is what defines what’s skillful and what’s not skillful. Appropriate attention means seeing things in terms of the four noble truths. You see that there is stress, there is a cause for stress—something arises along with it, something you’re doing right now that creates the stress. There’s the basic stress that’s in everything that’s compounded, but here particularly we’re talking about the stress that comes from things you do in ignorance and out of craving. You want to look for the ignorance, you want to look for the craving, so that you can let them go and realize the cessation of stress. Then there’s the path to the end of stress: the things you do to let go of craving. All four of these truths are the things to look for in the present moment. Those are the topics you want to focus on.

When you’re dealing with the breath, this can turn out in several ways. One is that you might see that the breath is stressful, so what do you do? You try to comprehend it. Where is the stress? To what extent is the stress simply part of any breathing and to what extent are you adding stress on top of it unnecessarily? You want to comprehend that. In other words, you want to see it clearly until you develop a sense of dispassion for the stress you add to things, so that you can focus on the effort to keep track of the breath, to be more and more consistent in following the breath, to strengthen your concentration, to strengthen your focus.

Those are the primary things you focus on: either developing the path or comprehending the stress. They go together, but you'll find there are times in your meditation when you emphasize one more than the other. Particularly in the beginning, you want to focus on developing your powers of concentration. The more focused you are, the more clearly you're going to see things.

So those are the three qualities you bring—mindfulness, alertness, ardency—and all of them are trained by appropriate attention, your desire to see where you're creating unnecessary suffering. Actually, it's all over, even in the way you breathe. The Buddha said that if breathing is done with ignorance, it leads to suffering. When you're ignorant of the ways your mind talks to itself, it's going to lead to suffering, the way you relate to feelings and perceptions is going to lead to suffering. The only way to cut through that ignorance is to be as consistently aware as possible.

This is why we start with the breath. It's right here, something immediately present, yet something we tend not to pay much attention to. After all, even if we don't pay attention to it, it'll still come in and go out. So the question is: Why bother?

Well, for one thing, the breath keeps you grounded in the present moment, where the mind is creating unnecessary suffering and stress. And two, when you're close to the breath, you're also close to all the processes of fabrication or intention in the mind. When you're close to your intentions, you can begin to see where the ignorance is. This is one area where we tend to cover things up. We don't pay much attention to our intentions. And we're not really all that honest with ourselves about them.

This is where the real ignorance lies. It isn't ignorance of a metaphysical or abstract issue, or that you're ignorant about somebody's teachings. You're simply ignorant about your own intentions and how those intentions cause suffering. If you were to be able to look at these things more and more directly, you'd see that even though we tell ourselves we want to create happiness and we want to be happy, the things we do create suffering. We carry it around with us all the time. Even though we tell ourselves that we love ourselves, that we want to find true happiness, still we keep on creating all this suffering.

This is why we have to pay very close attention to our intentions. It may seem like we're focusing on little tiny things when the vast space of the unconditioned is all around us, just waiting to be found, but you don't find the unconditioned by getting spacey. You find it by paying very close attention to what you're doing, catching yourself in the act of creating suffering and then learning how to let go, i.e., how to stop doing that. It's in seeing unskillful

intentions, learning to drop them, and dropping them with awareness: That's where the knowledge for awakening will arise.

So it's in looking at the details that you're going to open up to something larger. A lot of people don't like that idea. They'd rather just let go of their lives and messes they've created. Instead of trying to straighten out their messes, they'd like to say that the messes don't matter, because the mind will then open up to something bigger, and somehow the messes will take care of themselves.

You've got to clean up your messes. There are no two ways around it. This means looking at parts of the mind that you ordinarily don't like to look at—i.e., your motivations for doing things—because sometimes they're much less than honorable. We don't like to admit ourselves that we have dishonorable intentions, but there they are. You're not going to get past them by denying them, because that just creates more ignorance, which leads to more suffering.

This is why meditation is a chastening project. As Ajaan Mun once said, when you meditate, when you start practicing, what you see is your defilements. You get a chance to study them. And you study not to accept them as they are. You accept them just to the extent that there they are, and you've got to do something about them.

That's the other thing you've got to accept: that you can do something about these things. It may take time, take energy, take a lot of dedication, which is why this is a long-term project. That's something you also have to accept. Once you accept it, you get to work. Each of those four noble truths has a duty. There are imperatives built into the practice. Right now we're focusing on the imperative of trying to be more and more mindful, more and more concentrated, to keep the mind centered on the breath, and then figuring out how to do it skillfully. If you put too much pressure on the breath, it's going to cause problems down the road. The body will feel comfortable, and when the body feels uncomfortable, you're not going to want to stay. So the question is: how to develop a level of concentration, a level of mindfulness, that you can maintain consistently.

This takes practice. As they say in the texts—*bhavito, bahulikato*—you develop it, you pursue it, you do it again and again and again. And as with any skill, practicing doesn't mean just putting in lots of hours. It means being really observant as to what's going on, trying to catch where you're adding unnecessary stress, unnecessary hardship, unnecessary burden to the project, and then learning how to stop adding those unnecessary elements.

This is what anupassana is all about. You stick with one thing and you watch it continuously, and then you keep watch for all the other mental habits you have that are going to come around it, because as they say, the way you do anything is

the way to everything. If you tend to live your life in a sloppy way, then your meditation is going to start out sloppy. If you live in a haphazard, careless way, your meditation is going to start out haphazard and careless. But you can change your habits. If you couldn't change your habits, there would be no point in trying to practice. There wouldn't have been any point in the Buddha's teaching. People would be stuck the way they are, and there would be nothing anybody can do. But we *can* change our habits if we see that they really are causing us problems and if we have the desire to change.

So try to be ardent in the practice. Try to do it as skillfully as you can, being observant, being honest with yourself as to what works and what doesn't work.

Ajaan Lee has a nice image in one of his talks. He says it's like learning how to weave a basket. The teacher can tell you the basic patterns for weaving and give you some examples, but you're the one who has to learn how to weave and you're the one who has to teach yourself how to weave. Once you've got the basic patterns, that doesn't guarantee you're going to learn how to become a good, consistent weaver or make a basket that really looks good. That requires your own powers of observation. So you make a basket and you look at it. How is the weave? Is it fine enough? Is it consistent enough? If it's not, what can you do? You go back and look at the way you weaved things, to see where you were inconsistent, to see where you were careless, where you were not paying attention. Learn to pay more attention to what you're doing this time around, and to the results you're getting. And over time, if you follow this through again and again, you find that the baskets get better and better.

And it's the same with the breath. You use the breath as your means for training the mind in the same way that you use the vines or whatever you use to weave the basket as your teachers. Over time, you get more mindful and your powers of concentration develop.

So this quality of ardency is really important in the practice. Mindfulness is something we all have to some extent or another. We can keep some things in mind. The question is, are we keeping the right things in mind? In the same way, to some extent we already have some alertness. We know to some extent what we're doing. It's the ardency that takes those qualities and turns them into skills that really make a revolutionary change in the mind—ardency informed by the knowledge of what's right effort, informed by the four noble truths and the duties appropriate to them. In other words, informed by appropriate attention, learning what's important to focus on, what you don't have to focus on, and really sticking with things that are going to make a difference, learning how to breathe in a way that's not ignorant, learning how to think about the breath in a way that's not

ignorant, learning how to relate to your feelings and perceptions, realizing that you can change the labels you put on things, and that it's going to have an impact on how you breathe and how you feel. All these things are interrelated.

So bring as much alertness and ardency to the practice as you can. Be as mindful as you can. These are the qualities that will allow you to see.