

## *The Best Use of Your Time*

*August 9, 2007*

The mind is used to having a long list of things that it has to think about or prepare for, so it's a special luxury to have some time where you can put the list aside and focus on one thing: the training of the mind itself. So try to make the most of this opportunity. Focus on your breath and be aware of the process of breathing, starting out throughout the whole body. If that's too much, you can focus on one spot: the tip of the nose, the middle of the chest, the base of the throat, anywhere in the body where you can sense that now the breath is coming in, now the breath is going out. The breath is not just the air coming in and out the nostrils, it's the whole process of the energy flow that brings the air in and then lets it go out.

So wherever you notice the feeling of the breathing, you can focus right there. Try to set the intention that you're going to *stay* right there as well. Of course, what will happen is that, after a couple breaths, other intentions will come up. You want to think about this, you want to remember that plan for this, whatever. You have to remind yourself that you've set up this one intention to train the mind. So you bring the mind back to the breath, and just keep doing that until somehow you get the message, that this is an important place to stay. It may not seem like much, and you can think of all kinds of other important issues that you might be planning for right now, so you need good reasons to remind yourself of why you're staying here.

One is that the mind really does need to be trained. You've probably seen lots of instances of people who have a lot of power, a lot of money, really misusing the power or misusing the money, and they end up doing a lot of harm to themselves and to the people around them. Why do they do that? Because the mind isn't trained. So even the goods of the world are not necessarily good. They depend on the goodness of the mind, "goodness" here meaning that you have control over your thinking, because you understand where your thinking can lead.

Thinking has consequences. Your ideas have consequences. They can lead to benefit or harm. If the mind's left to its own devices, if it stays untrained, it's like an animal that hasn't been trained. It can't do any work. Sometimes it's good, sometimes it leaves a mess all over the house. Only when it's trained can you get some real good out of it.

It's the same with the mind. The mind has to learn how to put its thoughts aside when it sees that they're going in the wrong direction. This is one of the

basic definitions of wisdom, realizing that things you do and say and think have consequences, and that sometimes things that you like to do or say or think can have unfortunate consequences, and things that you don't like to do or say or think can actually have good consequences. Wisdom lies in your ability to go for the good consequences and avoid the bad ones, no matter how much you like or dislike the causes. That requires training; it requires maturity. So we're trying to mature the mind here.

When you find the mind slipping off to something else, the ideal cure is just to pull it back to the breath. Let the breath be comfortable. Use the breath as a lure. It's your carrot for staying in the present moment. You can breathe in any way. You can breathe long in, long out; short in, short out; long in, short out; short in, long out; heavy or light; fast or slow; deep or shallow—any way that feels good right now. That's the carrot that pulls you in to the present moment, realizing that simply paying good attention to the way you breathe can relieve a lot of stress in the body.

You can think of the breath as a whole-body process that permeates down to your fingers and toes. And the way you breathe can relieve a lot of the stress that you tend to carry around in the body. People go to chiropractors and osteopaths and other bodywork professionals to get rid of stress, but a lot of stress you can actually get out of your body simply by the way you breathe. Maybe not all of it, but you can clear up a lot of stress that you're carrying around simply by breathing in a way that feels good all the way down inside.

But sometimes the carrot isn't enough. The mind keeps going back to certain ways of thinking, so you have to remind yourself: If you spent the hour thinking about those things, where would it take you? Do you really need a whole hour to think about those things? Often it's a pattern of thinking you've been through many, many times before, like old movies on the movie channel. You know what the characters are going to say, and yet you still watch the old movies anyhow. Even worse, most of the movies in your mind are not the sort of things you'd actually pay money to see at all. So why bother with them? And again where do they lead, these thoughts? Many of them lead to really unfortunate things. You get thinking about greed or lust or anger, and they end up causing you to do all kinds of things that you later regret.

So remind yourself that you've got better things to do with your time. The way you let the mind go, the things that you return to again and again, create ruts in the mind. Those neural pathways get well-traveled, and they get more and more ingrained; they become more and more second nature. So you've got to be careful about what you're training yourself in. Are you training yourself in greed, anger,

and delusion, or are you training yourself in mindfulness and alertness? You're constantly making these choices where you realize them or not.

So that kind of thinking is the stick, to remind yourself you've got something better to do. And although the other results in the meditation may not appear immediately, they build up over time. As you strengthen your mindfulness—in other words, the ability to keep the breath in mind—and strengthen your alertness—your ability to see what you're doing and the consequences of what you're doing—you can apply these strengthened qualities to any aspect of life.

And you find that you benefit, because the skill of a trained mind underlies all the other skills you might develop, whether they're physical skills or mental skills. The discipline that's required to keep the mind on one object and to be very observant: These skills can be applied to every activity in life that you might want to pursue.

So the work you do in keeping the breath in mind, observing the breath, has all sorts of good applications.

And here you've got the hour to work on training the mind. Remember that the Buddha once said that the difference between a wise person and a fool is that the wise person realizes the need to train the mind, whereas the fool doesn't realize it, thinks other things outside will bring in happiness. The wise person realizes that the trained mind is the source of happiness, because when your mind is well trained, no matter what outside circumstances are like, you can find a way to be happy.

One the reasons why the Buddha sent his monks out in the forest—aside from the fact that it's quiet and conducive place to observe your mind—was because there are bugs out there and there are all kinds of disagreeable animals and other things going on out there. It can be hot and it can be cold. You can sit there being miserable about it or you can decide, "I'm going to find where the opportunities for happiness are here." And you find that they lie inside. That kind of environment forces you to focus on the potentials in the mind. Here we are in a much more pleasant situation. There are some drawbacks—no place is perfect—but the opportunity for happiness is always here. It comes from the fact that the opportunity to make skillful choices is always here.

So do your best for the hour to make a skillful choice each time you breathe in, each time you breathe out: to stay with the breath, to be more sensitive to the breath, more observant of the breath, and to maximize the potential for happiness that lies within each of us. Make the best use of your time.