

Your Inner Teacher

October 30, 2007

When you meditate, you're both the teacher and the student at the same time. In other words, you're the student who's learning how to meditate. That's one part of the mind. The other part of the mind is the teacher, keeping watch over the student, to make sure that he's doing what he's supposed to do.

What you're supposed to be doing right now is staying with the breath. Try to notice in which part of the body the breath is most obvious—in other words, the sensations that tell you that now the breath is coming in, now the breath is going out. If you have these sensations in lots of different parts of the body, try to choose one area where it seems most obvious, most natural to stay focused. It could be the tip of the nose, the middle of the chest, the abdomen, any part of the body where you have the sensation that now the breath is coming in, now the breath is going out. Allow that area to stay relaxed all the way through the in-breath, all the way through the out-, and all the way through the spaces in between.

You'll find pretty quickly that the mind wanders off to something else. So you've got to bring it back. That's the teacher part, the teacher that says, "Okay, now you've got to come back." There are times when you have to be a stern teacher and other times when you have to be a good-hearted teacher.

When I first went to grade school, it was a little two-room school—60 kids altogether in eight grades. One teacher had grades one to three, the other had four through eight. The first grade teacher was the taskmaster. Her hair was always in place; she dressed very neatly. She had a saying, "If you work when you should work, then you shall play you should play. If you do not work when you should work, then you shall not play when you should play." She said it in a tone of voice that made you think it came from the Bible.

During recess, she would sit up by a window looking over the playground. She was up on a second story, or seemed like a second story when I was a little kid. I went back recently, and it wasn't all that far off the ground at all, but at the time it seemed way up there. If you misbehaved on the playground, the window would rise up, and you would see her arm pointing out the window, straight at you. You had to go in and sit down at your desk, because you couldn't play anymore.

The other teacher, Mrs. Lane, was an entirely different sort of person. Her hair was kind of frizzy, and she liked to smoke. So she'd announce the work of the day

for each of the grades and then go down to the basement to the lady's room and have a cigarette. My old brother had her. I never got to have her. By the time I got to fourth grade, they had changed teachers. But my brother tells a story from when he first went into the fourth grade. Mrs. Lane went down to the lady's room, and every kid in the room started running around and playing. Then at one point, most of the kids picked up the signal that Mrs. Lane was coming up the stairs, so they all got back to their seats, except for my brother, who was kind of excitable. He was still running around when she came into the room. So of course he had to stay after class that day. And basically what she told him then was, "Galen, you have to learn how to be sneaky. Listen for when I'm coming up the stairs."

You can imagine, out of the two teachers, who we all loved the most. But we also learned an awful lot from the strict one.

You need to have the same attitude when you're meditating. Sometimes you've got to be kind and gentle with the mind. When you find it wandering off, you say, "Okay, come on back." Other times, you have to be stricter. You can't just keep letting it wander around. This is the role of mindfulness, trying to keep the breath in mind, to keep reminding you to stay here with the breath. As soon as you catch yourself wandering off, that's the function of alertness: watching what's actually going on—one, watching what's going on with the breath, and then two, watching what's going on with the mind. Are you staying focused with the breath? If not, come right back.

So mindfulness and alertness work together. Ardency is the quality of mind that keeps them all together: the mindfulness and the alertness and the breath. Try to do it in a skillful way. In other words, when you're getting frustrated, those are the times for Mrs. Lane. You learn how to cajole yourself back into doing what you know should be doing. When the mind is just ornery, that's when you have to be more like my first grade teacher—whose name was Mrs. DeGraff, by the way, not related. That's when you need the stern teacher's, "Okay, you've got to get back, right now. No fooling around."

When you're with the breath, it's more a matter of figuring out exactly what needs to be done. What's the most comfortable way of breathing right now? Try experimenting with the breath. Try some long, deep in-and-out breaths. See how they feel. Then try some shorter breathing. See how that feels. Fast, slow, gentle, heavy: Experiment with the breath for a while to see what the mind likes, what feels physically most comfortable, what helps to keep that spot that you've chosen open, comfortable, easeful.

Sometimes you don't have to think too much about experimenting. Just maintain that spot that you're chosen, wide open and relaxed, and you'll find that the breath will adjust itself in a way that keeps that spot open and relaxed with a sense of fullness and ease. At times like that, the teacher can fall into the background. We're actually doing instead of just depending on the disciplinarian to do the actual teaching, suggesting ideas. We're exploring things, learning new things.

There's a lot to learn about the breath. Traditionally, when they talk about the body as having four elements, they're not talking about the chemical elements, they're talking more about properties. Breath is the sense of motion in the body. The water element is the liquid sensations, the cool sensations. The fire element is the warm sensations. The earth element is the solid sensations. This is basically how you feel the body from within.

So right now we're working with the breath, the wind property. They say that all of these properties fill the whole body. In some parts of the body they're more apparent, but the potential for any of them is present in every part of the body. So you might want to think of the whole body as breath, the whole body as energy. Energy can't be bottled up. If you feel there's a sensation of constriction or being bottled up in some part of the body, you're not with the breath. You're with something else.

So try to get a sense of how that particular body sensation can be perceived as energy that flows with no restrictions. You might want to make a survey of the whole body before you settle down. Notice, when you breathe in, where there's a sense of the energy being bottled up or stuffed into a part of the body or constricted and uncomfortable in whatever way. Think of it flowing around whatever the obstacle may be. In other words, there's more of a sense of fluidity in the body, a sense of easy motion.

You find that it's more comfortable just sitting here with the body when you see it in that light. You've got these different potentials here for solid feelings or liquid feelings or energy feelings or warm feelings. Sometimes all you need to do is make a mental note that it's *possible* for these feelings to be in any part of the body wherever they're needed. That helps to dissolve a lot of the tension that tends to build up in areas of the body that you tend to hold in. If there's a pain in part of the body, maybe you've tensed up around the pain, so try to relax around it and see what happens.

This way, you get more and more in touch with how you're directly experiencing the body—and also gaining a sense that you don't have to just sit here with whatever is here. You can change things in the body simply through the

power of thought. Notice the sensations that you didn't notice before. Connect things in ways you never connected them before.

When you're doing this, the student and the teacher are working together, and the disciplinarian falls into the background. Concentration that's kept going simply through force of will is not very stable, not very lasting. Concentration that comes from being interested in seeing what's actually going on, learning to explore, experiment, learn new things: That kind of concentration has a good solid basis.

So there's a lot to explore here in your sense of the body, seeing how the energy flows down the nerves, through the blood vessels in the different parts of the body. Once you have a sense of one spot in the body that seems at ease, see if you can spread that sense of being at ease through the rest of the body as well.

This is called concentration fostered by your powers of discernment, your willingness to explore and learn new things. The breathing isn't mechanical, and the mind doesn't feel strapped down. You're not trying to put yourself into a trance, so don't force the breath too much. You want the breath to be easy and flowing, and you're just here taking keeping tabs on it, observing, noticing connections, what feels good, what doesn't feel good, because a lot of the issue in concentration is how you can make it pleasant. It has to be to your liking. And at this point, the role of the teacher, at least the outside teacher, is simply to point out to you that there are more possibilities than you may have thought of in how you can relate to the body, how you can see the different sensations in the body.

From that point on, it's up to your inner teacher and student to point things out to each other, to ask questions, to look for answers, on how you can settle down and be at ease in the present moment.

We were in a bookstore recently and saw what was supposed to be a humorous book. Among other things, it mentioned the different religions in America, and Buddhism was the "go-figure" religion: "You wrap yourself in a robe, sit under the tree, and be aware?" Well, there's a lot to be aware of, there's a lot to explore right here. One of the main problems in our cultures is that we don't look inside enough. We don't explore inside enough.

So here's a chance for a whole hour. Sit here with your eyes closed and be aware. But ask questions, look for answers—first on how you can stay here with a sense of ease and then on seeing what there is to learn here. You start with the body, and as you learn about the body, finally it goes more and more into the mind. A lot of it comes from simply feeling your way, experimenting: the ideal way to learn.