

Basic Stuff

November 19, 2007

When you meditate, you want to get your body in position and your mind in position. First the body: Face straight ahead, place your hands on your lap, and close your eyes. That's it. That's the easy part. The hard part, of course, will be to maintain this position. But try to sit comfortably.

Then get your mind in position. Tell yourself, "May I be happy." We had that reflection just now that life is full of aging, illness, and death. They're unavoidable. There's also separation. That's unavoidable. Our opportunity for happiness lies in our own actions. And where do actions come from? They come from the mind. If the mind is well trained, then the things you do and say and think are actually going to lead to happiness. If it's not trained, they tend to lead to suffering.

This is one of the big paradoxes in life: We all act out of the desire for happiness, but often the things we do lead to unhappiness, to suffering. That's because we're ignorant of what actually leads to happiness. This is why we have to meditate: to get rid of the mind's ignorance, to make it more alert, more awake, to understand the principles of happiness better. Which means we also have to understand the principles of suffering, why people suffer. You can't solve a problem without digging into the cause and then eliminating the cause. If you try to eliminate just the effects while you're still doing the causes, it's not going to work.

The cause here is ignorance, lack of awareness. So you try to make yourself more aware of what's going on in the mind. Now, because it's hard to focus directly on the mind to begin with, we first focus on the breath, because of all the things in the world that are close to the mind, that's the closest. So be aware of the breath when it comes in; be aware of the breath when it goes out. You can focus on the sensation of breathing anywhere in the body at all—at the tip of the nose, the middle of the chest, the abdomen, even the actual passage of air through the nose or through the movement of the chest and the abdomen as you breathe in, breathe out. Choose an area of the body that's congenial, where it feels comfortable to stay focused.

And try to make your focus just right. If you clamp down too hard on things, it's going to make the breath uncomfortable, and you won't want to stay. If your focus is too loose and casual, it'll go wandering off.

The image they give in the texts is of holding a baby chick in your hand. If you squeeze the chick too tightly, it's going to die. If you grasp it too loosely, it's going

to fly away. So hold it just right, all the way through the in-breath, all the way through the out-.

Try to find what kind of rhythm and texture of breathing feels best right now. If you're feeling tired, you may want to breathe in a way that's more energizing. If you're feeling tense and stressed out, you may want to breathe in a way that's more relaxing. And keep tabs on what feels best, because sometimes it'll change. If you want, you can use a meditation word along with the breath, as a way of helping you stay with it. You can think *buddho*, or *bud-* with in-breath, *dho* with the out-. *Buddho*. It means awake. It's the quality of mind you're trying to develop here.

As you stay with the breath, you actually find several things are going on at once. To begin with, you're being mindful. In other words, you're remembering to stay with the breath. And you're being alert to watch what's actually going on: how the breath feels, whether the mind is still with the breath or not. You've got to keep checking on the mind, too, because sometimes it wanders off without your realizing what's happening. If you catch the mind wandering off, bring it right back. If you catch it wandering again, bring it back again. No matter how many times it wanders off, keep bringing it back. Don't get discouraged. After all, you're training the mind in new habits, so it's going to take a while.

The simple fact that you can't stay with the breath should give you a strong sense of urgency in wanting to do the practice, because if you can't control your own mind, what can you control in life?

So try to develop mindfulness by keeping the breath in mind, alertness by watching over the breath, watching over the mind—and then there's the third quality called ardency, which means you really do this with your full attention, you try to do it as well as you can. When you catch the mind wandering off, you bring it right back. You don't wait. You don't say, "Well, I've got a whole hour here, it doesn't matter. I can wander around for five minutes." That doesn't train the mind in new habits at all. It just allows it to follow its old habits.

So when the mind is wandering off, thinking about something else, you can just drop whatever that something else is, in mid-sentence. You don't have to complete the thought. You don't have to tuck it in at the edges. Just drop the thought unfinished and come back to the breath.

While you're with the breath, try to breathe as comfortably as you can. It is possible to breathe in such a way that feels really gratifying, really refreshing. The fact that the mind wandered off shows that you haven't gotten as much out of the breath as you could, so try to explore the breathing process a little bit more. Make yourself really sensitive to how the breath feels, and think about how you might make it feel more comfortable, allowing it to be longer, allowing it to be shorter,

deeper, more shallow, heavier, lighter. Think of the breath as a whole-body process, because it's not just the air coming in and out of the lungs. It's the energy flowing through the entire body.

When you breathe in, try to notice where there's tension in the body—in the arms and the legs, in the shoulders, in the back. When you breathe out, notice where you're holding on to tension, and then try to breathe in such way that you can breathe in without creating new tension, and you can breathe out allowing any tension that's already there to dissolve away.

When you think in this way, you realize there's a lot to explore in the body right now. There's a lot to explore in the process of breathing. That helps keep you interested in the breath, and as long as you're with the breath, you're in the present moment and you're very close to your own mind. You begin to see the effect that comfortable breathing has on the mind. It can soothe a lot of the mind's frazzled edges. When the mind feels soothed and comfortable, then it's more likely to act in a skillful way.

Sometimes you notice that the mind affects the breath. When there's a sudden thought of anger or of fear, there will be a catch in the breath, a tightness, say, in your stomach or your chest. When you sense that, allow that tightness to relax. Think of the breath dissolving it away. This way, the breath is both a mirror for the mind and also a means of gaining some control over which thoughts you're going to follow, which thoughts you aren't. You begin to see that you have more of a choice than you thought.

All too often, we simply act on impulse. A thought pops into the mind and comes right out the mouth. An idea of something you want to do comes in the mind, and before you've even thought about it, you're already acting on it. That's why we suffer so much in life. We don't think carefully about cause and effect. We don't stop and realize that we have the choice not to act, even when there's a very strong impulse. We're afraid that if we don't act, we'll get all this negative energy bottled up inside us and then it'll turn into The Thing and go underground and create a lot of problems.

But it doesn't have to be that way. When an impulse to do something unskillful seems to build up in the body, think of the breath coming in and dissolving that bodily pressure away. Then you can actually look at the thought behind it. Is this something you really want to do? Where is it going to lead? What kind of results do you anticipate? This is the beginning step in learning to have some control over your mind—your thoughts, your words, your deeds—and in developing skillfulness in all your actions.

This is how we work toward happiness. Happiness isn't something that just comes floating by randomly. It comes from our actions, just as suffering comes from our actions. We may think that things outside cause us to suffer, but it's the way we get worked up about them: That's what actually causes us to suffer. Which means you have to turn around and really look at your mind, to put yourself in a position where you have more control over what you actually do or say or think.

So the breath is a means by which you get a handle on the mind so that you're not just a victim of your old habits. You begin to realize you have choices. When you're coming from a greater sense of ease in the body and clarity in the mind, you're more likely to make the right choices. That's the beginning principle of wisdom: "What when I do it will lead to my long-term welfare and happiness?" That's the question that leads to wisdom. Of course, the question itself is wise. IT shows that you realize, one, your happiness depends on your own actions, and two, that long-term happiness is better than short-term, because short-term turns on you.

Short-term happiness is like a snake. You obviously don't want to grab hold of a snake at its mouth, because that would be painful. But most of us see, well, there's no mouth at the tail, there are no fangs there, it looks pleasant, so we grab hold of the tail. Of course, what happens is that it's all part of the same snake, so it turns around and bits us.

That's what short-term happiness does. It turns into something else. When it turns into something else, it doesn't turn into more happiness and pleasure, it turns into pain, suffering. Long-term happiness doesn't have any teeth. It can't bite you. It doesn't want to bite you. That's the kind of happiness you want. And you realize that it comes from your actions.

This is where wisdom begins, and then you need to develop strategies and techniques to help bolster your wisdom, so that you can overcome your old habits. This is why we come back to the breath, because this is where all our actions come from, and as I said, it's the one thing you can know that's closest to knowing your own mind. Learn how to use the breath as an ally in learning to become skillful and wise, so that the principle that all beings are the owners of their actions, will lead to happiness.

Even though there's aging, illness, death, and separation in life, they don't have to make you suffer if you learn how to train the mind to have mindfulness, alertness, and clarity around these issues. You realize that even though there is aging in life, the mind doesn't have to age. There is illness, but the mind doesn't have to be ill. There is death, but the mind doesn't die. There may be separation, but the mind doesn't have to get separated from its good qualities.

So you want to invest in the mind as much as possible, making your mind as skillful as possible. That's the path to true happiness.