

Mindfulness Immersed in the Breath

May 7, 2008

Each evening, before the meditation, we have that chant: thoughts of goodwill. Goodwill for ourselves, goodwill for all beings. This reminds us of why we're here. We're here because we want true happiness. And we want a happiness that doesn't inflict any pain, any suffering on anyone else. We've also realized that this happiness has to come from causes. The path that the Buddha lay down doesn't simply float by.

So we say, "May I be happy." We're also saying, "May I do the things that lead to happiness." That's why we're here. That's what we're doing: developing qualities of mind that can provide that happiness, starting with a happiness that comes from getting the mind concentrated, still, at ease in the present moment. That, in turn, becomes a cause for higher levels of happiness. Deeper, more lasting.

So this is the context of the meditation: goodwill for all—with the understanding that this happiness that we're wishing for ourselves and others has to come from causes.

Then we get to work. Focus on your breath coming in, going out. It's from focusing on the breath that you develop a lot of the important qualities you need to be truly happy. Keep reminding yourself to stay with the breath: That's called mindfulness. Then be alert to what's going on with the breath. Know when it's coming in; know when it's going out. Notice how it feels. Where you feel the sensations of the breath, where you feel the energy coming in, going out of the body, may not be in the places you expect.

This is why breath meditation is not simply a rote exercise. It's a type of exploration: sensitizing yourself to how the breathing process actually feels in the body. Alertness also means noticing when the mind has wandered off. A little thought bubble appears in the mind, and suddenly you find yourself in the bubble going someplace else. As soon as you're alert to what's happening, let the bubble burst and come back. You don't have to ride the thought until it's nicely concluded. If there are a lot of loose ends, just leave the loose ends dangling and come back.

Ask yourself: Where could the breath be more comfortable? You might think of allowing the breath to be shorter, longer, deeper, more shallow, heavier or lighter, with the emphasis on the word *allowing*. You don't put pressure on the breath, you simply think, "The breath can be shorter," or, "It can be longer," and you'll find the body responding. Stay with it for a while to see how it feels. If it

feels good, stick with it. If not, you can think of allowing it to go in a different direction, with a different quality, a different rhythm.

In this way, as you get absorbed in the breath, you're not even thinking about trying to make the mind concentrated. The concentration comes from your interest in the breath. If the mind is not interested in the breath and keeps wandering off, ask yourself: What is it that's attracting the mind away? Sometimes it's random stuff. In that case, you don't have to pay too much attention to it, just bring the mind back to the breath. But if there's a particular theme or particular thought that keeps pulling you away, you have to teach yourself the drawbacks of going with that thought right now. It may be really important, something you've got to do in your work or in your home life, but have a sense of time and place. Now is not the time to think those thoughts. You can think about them later. If you've gotten the mind to settle down and be quiet for a while, you'll then be in a better position to think those thoughts clearly.

So you're not being irresponsible. You're not letting a good opportunity go by. You're actually preparing the mind to deal with the issues of life from a position of strength, a position of clarity and well-being.

Then bring the mind back to the breath.

If that doesn't work, you can consciously ignore those thoughts. You know they're there, lurking in your mind, but you decide to pay no attention to them. You're not going to get involved in the conversation. You're not going to let them pull you in. That's another way of dealing with distractions. They can have one corner of the room, but you're over here in another corner, focusing on the sensation of the body as felt from the inside.

Try to fill the whole body with your awareness so that you're aware of the whole body down to the tips of your fingers, the tips of your toes. The thoughts can be off in the world of words and ideas, but you're here with the world of the body felt from within. That may help you stay disentangled from the thoughts, and often when the thoughts don't attract your attention, they begin to get lighter, then dissolve away.

If they don't, and you find yourself getting pulled into them again, try to notice where in the body you feel tension that corresponds with a thought. Thoughts can't stay in your awareness unless there's a little bit of tension someplace in the body. It might be in your legs, your hands, in your arms, or someplace in your face. Try to notice, when the thought comes up, where the tension appears. Once you notice that, think of relaxing it. Or as a preventive matter, you can go through the whole body from the top down to the toes, or from the toes up to the top of the head, consciously relaxing all your muscles so

that none of your joints are tight. As soon as the tension of a thought appears again, you'll notice it in an area that you had already relaxed. Well, go back and relax it again.

These are some of the ways you can deal with the distractions that are sure to come in to disturb your concentration. What's important is that you don't get upset or down on yourself for the fact that distractions are destroying your meditation.

The method of last resort is to clench your teeth, press the tip of your tongue way up in the roof of your mouth, and just tell yourself, "I will not think that thought." As you focus on the tension of having the tongue way up in your the roof of your mouth, it makes it difficult to think anything much at all. That's the tool of last resort, but if it's necessary, you use it. A lot of people have their favorite tools for dealing with distraction. This one is the sledgehammer. It's nobody's favorite, but you can't play favorites.

Each thought may require a different tactic, and you want to be good at all five. In other words, simply pulling yourself out of the thought, bringing you back to the breath, that's one. The second one is reminding yourself of the drawbacks, that you don't want to think about that issue right now. This is not the time, this is not the place, you've got better things to do. The third is ignoring the distracting thought, the fourth is relaxing around the thought, and the fifth is the sledgehammer. Use whichever one is needed.

Then do your best to get as interested in the breath as you can, because the breath energy is not just the air coming in and out through the nostrils. It's the whole energy flow of the body. Sometimes the energy flows, sometimes it's there just as a buzz throughout all the nerves, through the blood vessels—the energy buzz that lets you know that you're in a living body, that you've got arms, you've got legs, you've got a torso, you've got a head.

You want that energy buzz to be comfortable. Try to notice where it's tight or restricted. Think of it relaxing. Think of the energy flowing through the restrictions. Remind yourself that the body is composed of atoms, and there's lots of space between the atoms—there's actually a lot of space *in* the atoms—so there's plenty of space in here for the energy to move around. Explore that. Get to know it. This is an area of our awareness that tends to get shut off very easily because we're so concerned about issues outside that we close off this awareness so that we can focus more awareness on the other issues.

Now it's time to come back and open things up again. It's like a house that was closed up, boarded up for a long time. You come back in, and you're cleaning things out. Open up the windows and the doors so that fresh air can come in.

Clean everything out, all the nooks and crannies, so that you can come back and really inhabit this part of your awareness.

It's in this embodied awareness that the Buddha laid out his teachings, his understanding of what it's like to be inside a body, dealing with mental issues and physical issues all at the same time. This is the place where they meet right at the breath. When the Buddha talks about *nama-rupa*, mental events and physical events, he's describing them from the point of view of an awareness that's fully inhabiting the body.

If you want to make sense out of his teachings, you have to come and sit here, fully inhabiting your body. Then notice how you experience events in the mind, how you experience events in the body, from this position. It's like reading a description of what the Grand Canyon looks like from Yaki Point. You have to go to Yaki Point if you want to judge the description. If you go to some other point, or look at some other canyon, the words don't fit. Or you may apply the words to the wrong things and think you understand. But if the Buddha is talking about the view from Yaki Point, you've got to go to Yaki Point. That's when you know what he's talking about.

So do your best to inhabit the body fully. The technical term is *kayagata-sati*, mindfulness immersed in the body. Try to inhabit the body fully, from the head down to the feet, through the back of the neck, down the shoulders, and out to the arms to the tips of the fingers. Then try to stay here no matter what else you notice, no matter what else you're aware of. When you're talking to other people, try to be here in the body.

You may notice the sound of the helicopter. Well, you're still here in the body. The sound of the helicopter doesn't destroy the breath, doesn't destroy your sense of the body. All too often, you leave the sense of the body to focus on the helicopter, but that's not what you want. You want to stay here. Stay grounded here. Learn to maintain this awareness, because it gives you a good foundation. It keeps you grounded in all your activities.

When you're dealing with other people or engaged in other jobs, you can still fully inhabit the body, and that brings a whole new dimension to what you're doing. You can be more sensitive to events in the mind. This awareness will have an impact on the breath, especially the more sensitive you come to this field of breath energy in and around the body. You feel the impact of thoughts—in the sense of the quality of the energy in the thoughts—whether it's helpful or not, whether there's any greed, anger, or delusion inhabiting them.

You want to sensitize yourself to this area because it's from this point of view that you can see more clearly what's going on in the mind, what's going on in the

body, and the extent to which you're manipulating these sensations in a skillful or unskillful direction: unskillful in the sense of creating greater stress, a greater sense of burdensomeness; skillful in the sense of reducing the stress.

It's in learning to stay right here that you can make sense of the Buddha's teachings. You see what he meant and you can see how his teachings can be used as tools. You can start making more sense of your own body, your own mind, having a greater understanding of what you're doing and what you could do more skillfully, so that the true happiness you're here for becomes more and more a reality.

That harmless happiness is something you can touch right here. There's a phrase in the Canon where they talk about touching the deathless with the body or seeing the deathless through the body. It's in this part of your awareness, this range of awareness—mindfulness immersed in the body—that things can open up to that dimension as well.