

## *Stick with It*

*December 28, 2009*

Close your eyes and focus on the breath. When you breathe in, notice: Where do you feel the sensation of breathing? Where do you feel it when you breathe out? Keep your awareness focused right there. It can be any part of the body. The important thing is that you allow it to be comfortable. Don't tense up or force the breath or squeeze the breath. Just allow the breath to come in and out in a way that feels easy and natural. You can experiment a bit to see what kind of breathing feels best, making it a little longer to see how that feels. If it feels good, try a little longer. Or if long breathing doesn't feel good, you can try shortening it until you get just the right rhythm. You can make it heavy or light, fast or slow, shallow or deep.

If you have trouble staying with the breath, you might want to use a meditation word along with it. A common one is *buddho*, which means "awake." It's one of the titles the Buddha earned through his awakening, and it's a quality of mind that we want to develop. You can think *bud-* with the in-breath and *dho* with the out-. *Buddho, buddho.*

Otherwise, you have no other responsibilities right now. You do, though, have the responsibility of looking after your mind to make sure it stays here. If you catch it wandering off, just bring it right back. Catch it again, bring it back again. Each time you bring it back, ask yourself: What way of breathing would feel really good right now? Reward yourself with good comfortable breathing each time you come back, and the mind will be more and more likely to come back with a sense of ease, a sense of interest.

If you simply force the mind to stay here, it's not going to stay. It's going to rebel after a while. But if you make the breath interesting, you're more likely to stay. Remind yourself: This is the energy of your life. It keeps the body alive and allows you to sense the different parts of the body—because breath is not just the air coming in and out of the lungs, it's the whole flow of energy in the body as you breathe in, as you breathe out. The more sensitive you get to the breath, the more you realize it's happening all over the body. In some places it's more noticeable, and other places it's more subtle. But as your awareness gets more and more centered, more and more settled, you begin to pick up the subtleties.

And you want to allow them to be comfortable, too. You might make a brief survey through your body as you breathe in, breathe out, to see how it feels in the arms, how it feels in the legs, in your head, in your torso. If you notice any sense of

tension or tightness related to the breathing as you breathe in, or any holding on to tension as you breathe out, allow it to relax. Think of it dissolving away, so that there's no stiffness or tightness, say, in your wrists or your ankles, your knees or your elbows, or anywhere at all in the body.

As you do this, you find that a sense of ease, even a sense of fullness develops. Allow that sense of ease and fullness to spread around. Keep up the survey until you feel the mind is ready to settle down. Find a spot that feels most congenial, where you feel just right to stay there, and the breath feels good, the mind feels comfortable there. Then allow your awareness to spread from that spot to fill the whole body. Then just try to maintain that sense of broad, centered awareness.

This is something you develop. This is something you work on. We often hear that the whole point of meditation is to let go, but there's also the aspect of developing. That's what the Pali word for meditation, *bhavana*, means: to develop. You're developing mindfulness, you're developing concentration. And a part of concentration is a sense of ease and well-being, a sense of fullness, so that the mind is willing to settle down to become one with the breath.

Then as you develop that sense of ease, the sense of being centered, try to maintain it. That's one of the more difficult parts of the meditation—sticking with it—because the mind is fickle. It may be interested for a little while, but then it'll say, "Okay, enough of that. What else is there?" Well, things haven't really developed as fully as they can. We're not here for entertainment. We're here to develop good qualities of the mind, and a large part of developing is just sticking with it.

It's like planting a seed—or like those trees we planted yesterday. We planted the trees, and that was fun, planting a tree. But if you then leave it alone and don't check up on how the tree is doing, after a while it'll die. You have to keep looking after it, watering it, giving it fertilizer, making sure it doesn't develop any diseases. This is the more tedious part of the meditation, but it's sticking with it over the long haul that makes all the difference.

So you learn to encourage yourself to stick with it. Remind yourself: The important things in life don't come quickly. They don't come easily. They require effort. And even when you've got something nice, it's not going to stay nice unless you look after it. So as the mind settles down like this, the important skill is learning how to maintain this sense of well-being and to stick with it as consistently as possible.

This is where you develop the qualities of mindfulness and alertness. Mindfulness is what reminds you what to do now and also *why* you're doing it. It's not just a matter of technique. It's also a matter of motivation. You remind

yourself that it's important that the mind be trained. It's important that it have a sense of feeling centered, because life has so many currents pushing you this way, pushing you that, all kinds of directions: what this person wants, what that person wants. If you don't have your own sense of center inside, you're just going to get pushed around. You lose touch what's important in your life, which is the well-being of the heart and mind.

But when the mind has a sense of well-being, then the things you do, say, and think come from a good place. And it's your actions that really shape your life. You want to make sure your actions do come from a good place.

So even though it may take effort and patience to stick with the meditation, the effort is well spent. The patience has its rewards. Some of them come immediately. Some of them come over time. So give the mind some time to stay here. If there's any impulse to go think about something else, remind yourself that you can do that later. It's rare that you have the peace and quiet and the opportunity to really develop the mind, to strengthen its good qualities, so that they form a good foundation for your life.