

Looking at Your Life

March 21, 2010

When you bring the mind the breath, you're developing a good vantage point, a good place to look at what's going on in the body, a good place to look at what's going on in the mind—and a good place to look at what's going on in your life. There tends to be a lot of confusion in all three of these areas because the mind is running around in the midst of these things. In the body, there's a pain here and a pain there. The mind, of course, has all kinds of thoughts going on. And in your life there are all kinds of people influencing your thoughts, all kinds of decisions that have to be made.

There's a passage where the Buddha compares bringing the mind to the breath, bring it to concentration, to taking the mind up to a tower where you're above the ordinary turmoil of things. You start seeing the larger picture. In terms of the body, it's good place to check out how the body feels inside, because the breath is the main property the body that influences the others. When things aren't going well, you can sense it in the breath and, at the same time, you can use the breath as a medicine to treat some of the imbalances in the body.

So you want to take some time to get in touch not only with the breath coming in and going out, but also with the flow of energy in the body, how the body feels from inside. The concept may be foreign to a lot of us, this idea of breath energy flowing in the body, but just think of it as the basic feeling tone of the body. When you feel your hands from inside, what do you feel? That feeling: That's breath right there—the sense of where your arms are, your torso, your head, your legs. You've got the breath, you've got the blood flowing: These are the things that make up your primary sense the body. So look at those feelings and ask yourself, to what extent are they like energy? Or if you were to see them as energy, what kind of energy would they be? Would they be good or bad?

Seeing those feelings as energy allows you to play with them more than just seeing them as a given. You can simply use the power of thought, say, where there's a blockage: Think of relaxing it. Wherever there's a sense of something stagnant, think of it being allowed to move. If it were to move, where would it go? In this way, you open up new possibilities in how you relate to the body, how you hold the body, and open up more opportunities for the breath to really help maintain your health, the sense of well-being in the body that allows you to settle down and feel at home in the present moment.

And of course, as you're paying attention to the breath, the mind is right here as well. You can think of the breath as the point where the mind and the body meet. As you open up your awareness to the breath energy in the body, you're opening up your mind as well. The mind is surprisingly compartmented. It tends to focus in one area and then moves to something else, and moves to something else, and is very good at keeping everything else compartmented, hiding things from itself. But as you open up to the breath energy throughout the body, you begin to open up all those closed doors in the mind as well. When thoughts come bubbling up, you see them. Especially in the beginning of meditation, it's hard not to go along with them. But one of the talents you develop as you do this is learning to see a thought and not enter into it.

It's like a car driving up. You have the choice of jumping in the car or not. Most of us don't realize we have the choice. We just jump right in. But we can actually say No. Or it's like walking past a TV set where some show is on and deciding No, you don't want to enter into the show. You can see the images flickering across the screen, but you don't have to get involved. It's the same with our thoughts. Think of them as different proposals that are being offered by your inner committee, and you don't necessarily have to take up the proposals. The thoughts can just go through. They arise and pass away, and because you have a foundation in the body, you can look at the mind and be in a better position to gauge the thoughts: what things are really worth getting involved with, and what things are not.

First you want to develop the talent not to get involved. It's like when they teach Thai boxing: The first thing they teach you is how to withdraw, how to pull away from your opponent. Once you get good at pulling away, then you can enter into the fight, knowing that you have the talent to pull out safely at any time.

It's the same way when you're thinking. We know that at some point you're going to want to start examining your thoughts, but to do that well, you first have to be in a position where you can pull yourself out of any thought world at any time when you see that the examination is not getting anywhere.

So right now, as soon as you notice a thought coming up in this range of the body, breath, and mind—all of which you've gathered here—your immediate reaction should be just to let it go. When things get really still inside, then you can be like a spider in the middle of a web. Usually the spider is off to one side of the web, but it's sensitive to what's going on in the entire web. Wherever a fly or other insect comes and gets caught in the web, the spider immediately goes there, deals with it, then returns to its original spot.

In the same way, you have your spot here in the body, aware of the whole range of the body, and then whenever there's a stirring of a thought world, try to see where you feel it in the body and focus your attention there. Deal with the entanglement in the breath energy there. It's like zapping it and then going back to your home base to wait for the next thought stirring to develop.

As you get quicker and quicker at this, you begin to see more clearly the stages in how a thought world forms and how you decide to go into it and what happens as a result. That's an important skill right there in learning how to understand how the mind functions, how intentions get involved in creating your sense of the present moment.

As you get more and more talented, more and more skilled here, it also puts you in a good vantage point to look at your life as a whole. Where is your life going? What would be really good way of spending your time? Some of us have a few days left, some of us have lots of years left, but it's still not that much time. One of the qualities of time that you learn as you grow old is that time just eats things up. Things disappear, disappear. You have memories, but even then the memories get eaten up by time.

So you have to realize that time doesn't leave you much left. But that's no reason to give up on the future. You have to plan. You have to have some sense of what you would like to accomplish.

As we were saying today, there are four qualities you want to bring to this contemplation. One is discernment, looking at what really is a good thing to accomplish in life in the time you have remaining. You want to look at your strengths; you want to look at your weaknesses. What strengths you have to bring? How can they be developed? How can you build on them? And what would be a good use of them?

Once you've decided what you want, then the other part of discernment is figuring out a good way to go about it. What's the most skillful way to act toward that difficult goal, realizing that you may or may not live to see the goal accomplished? What you do know is that as you work toward the goal, you're going to develop certain qualities of mind.

What qualities do you want to develop? The Buddha suggests several lists of qualities. One is conviction, generosity, virtue, and discernment. Another list is what he calls the seven noble treasures. It starts again with conviction, which means conviction in the fact that what you do is important, not necessarily important in the eyes of the world, but important in shaping your life, shaping your mind. So you want to be as skillful as possible in your intentions, which means having not just good intentions, but wise intentions. Good intentions can

be extremely deluded. You mean well but you really don't understand what's going on. So you have to learn from trial and error. That's how wisdom is developed.

Then there's virtue. You want to make sure you don't harm anyone.

A sense of shame: The idea of doing something harmful comes up in the mind, and you'd feel ashamed to do it. Notice, this is not being ashamed about yourself. You're ashamed of the action, and being ashamed of the action is the counterpart of having good self-esteem, realizing that you're above that kind action. You'd be ashamed to stoop to do it.

This quality is paired with compunction, which from the Buddha's point of view means realizing that certain actions are going to have harmful results and you just don't want to cause that harm. You're concerned about the results of your actions. You're not apathetic.

And there are three other treasures: the knowledge you've developed from listening, generosity, and discernment.

The Buddha calls these treasures the treasures of the mind. Physical treasures, as he said, can get washed away by floods, burned by fires, stolen by thieves, taken by hateful heirs. But the treasures the mind are built into the mind. You realize that even if you don't live to see the results of your actions or the goal at which you've aimed, you do have these qualities in your mind. When death comes, it's like an evacuation order. You have to leave, and there's no time to pack your bags. What you take with you is your skill sets. Just like refugees: You find yourself suddenly in a new land. You may not know anybody, but if you've got a good skill set, you can survive.

This is all part of discernment, realizing that the wise approach to life is that you don't have much time, so you need to order your priorities as to what's really important in life and what's not, then figuring out the best way to go about attaining what you would like to attain, knowing that even you don't live to see the results, at least you've got good the qualities of mind you develop as part of that pursuit.

The three other qualities the Buddha mentioned as important for determination are truthfulness, in other words, staying true to your vision of what's important; relinquishment, realizing there are some things you've got to give up if you want to attain your goal. It's like playing a game of chess. You may like your pawns, you may like your bishop, and you may like your knight or whatever, but sometimes you have to sacrifice them if want to win the game. Nobody who can play chess without sacrificing pieces. This is something we tend

to resist. We want to win the chess and keep all our pawns. But it simply doesn't work that way.

So it's good to sit down and think about what you have to relinquish and seeing how important it is that you do that.

And how you learn not to get worked up about it. That's the fourth quality: calm. This functions in several ways. One is that you know that if you choose wisely, the mind is going to be calm as a result. That's one good way of measuring the wisdom of your actions. But you've also got to develop an attitude of calmness or equanimity toward the fact that there will be difficult things to do, difficult things to give up if you really want to make the best use of your time. So you learn to accept that fact and take it in stride.

Sometimes the things you have to give up are things you really hold dearly. There's a good story the Buddha tells about this point. There's a poor man who has a little shack, not the best sort; a pot of pumpkin seeds, not the best sort; a wife, not the best sort; an old bed, not the best sort. He sees the possibility of ordaining, but he just can't bring himself to do it. Even though the material things he's holding to are not all that desirable, still they're a huge obstacle, a huge fetter. The Buddha compares this with someone who is very wealthy, has many wives of the best sort, lots of wealth of the best sort, yet he may be able to give it all up to ordain.

So the fact that something may be dear to us doesn't mean that it's necessarily good for us. And the human mind is very arbitrary in what it holds on to. As the Buddha once said, we often suffer from aberrant perceptions, seeing constancy in things that are not constant, pleasure in things that are painful, we identify with things that really can't really identify with, and we see beauty in things that are really not beautiful. It's all very strange what we hold dear. He says this doesn't apply just to things. It also applies to all kinds of ideas and attitudes. But once you decide that you have a particular goal in life, something that really is important, then you've got to be willing to give up whatever doesn't fit in with that goal, whatever doesn't fit in with the path of practice leading to that goal, and accept this as part of the human condition. This way, you build on your strengths, and let go of your hindrances, let go of your fetters.

So it's good to develop a state of concentration here. It gives the mind the strength it needs to be true to itself, not to be a traitor to its deepest motivation, and the strength to be able to give up things that are going to be difficult to give up, knowing that you can develop a sense of well-being just sitting here with your eyes closed, focused on the breath. That gives you a lot of strength right there.

So develop this vantage point, making it as solid as you can. After all, this is the vantage point from which the Buddha himself gained awakening: the mind solidly with the breath, with a very clear and discerning sense of what's important in life, what's not, what questions to ask, what questions to put aside, what are the problems that really need to be solved, and what strengths you have within you that you can develop to solve those problems.

Try to develop this power you have inside, or the potential for this power inside, so that you can get above the crowd and see things from a larger and broader perspective, both within and without.