

Full, Focused Attention

March 22, 2010

Try to let go of all other thoughts and focus on thinking about the breath. Pose a few questions in the mind: Where do you feel the breath? Where do you feel the process of breathing? Pay attention right there. Try to develop a quality of intentness in what you're doing, giving it your full attention. Be very careful to keep this in mind, each time you breathe in, each time you breathe out, that this is where you want to stay—with the sensation of the body breathing—and allow the sensations to be comfortable. Don't clamp down on the body. Allow it some freedom.

Try to be sensitive to each breath as it comes in, each breath as it goes out, because the needs of the body will change. Once you find a comfortable rhythm of breathing, you have to be careful not to become mechanical with it. Be alert to the possibility that what may have felt good two or three breaths ago may not be so good right now, and make whatever adjustments are necessary.

That's all you have to do, but you have to give it your all for it really to make a difference: all your attention, all your meticulousness, all your mindfulness. We're not sitting here waiting impatiently for something else to happen. We're sitting here looking at the process of breathing. As you get more and more skillful at that, you can begin to look at the mind as it's looking at the process of breathing. Everything you need to know is right here.

The Buddha talks about four ways of establishing mindfulness—on the body in and of itself, feelings in and of themselves, mind in and of itself, or mental qualities in and of themselves—and they're all right here. With the breath, you've got the body. Paying attention to how the breath feels, you've got feelings of either pleasure or stress or more neutral feelings. They're right there, right next to the breath. Then there's your mind-state, which is either with the breath or not. It may be leaning a little bit toward desire, or leaning towards irritation or delusion. You want to notice that.

Then there are the mental qualities you bring to this. You may notice the hindrances. If sensual desire comes up and pulls you away from the breath, note that fact. Remind yourself that you don't have to go with that desire. You've traveled around with those desires a lot already, so it's time to let them go, to move on something better. See what else you can learn in life.

The same with ill will: Whoever you feel ill will for, you're not accomplishing anything of any worth, any value, by harboring ill will. It's an obstacle to your own

mind and an obstacle to your well-being. You don't gain anything from anyone else's suffering, so why wish them ill?

If sloth and torpor arise, you want to notice that drowsiness, that sleepiness. Ask yourself, exactly how do you know you're sleepy, aside from the fact that it's difficult to focus on the breath? What are the other physical symptoms of sleepiness? Where do you feel it? Around the eyes? Is there a heaviness in the head? Exactly what is this feeling of sloth, torpor, drowsiness? Sometimes just taking an interest in those questions can get you past it. Because sloth and torpor come not only when the body really needs sleep but also when you're bored and want to do something else. Nothing seems interesting here right now, so you try to think some way of escaping.

One of the best cures for that is to really take an interest in what you're doing, to realize that even though it may not seem as if much is going on, the mind is calculating, the mind is adjusting, the mind is doing all kinds of things. And of course the body is functioning. Lots of things are going on in the body. You're working with the breath to bring these two very complex things together. If you look carefully, you can see that a lot is going on right here, on many levels.

So try to take an interest. At the very least, ask yourself: What is this breath energy? Do I feel it only in the lungs or only in the nose, or are there other parts of the body that feel energy as well? How do those sensations of energy in the different parts the body relate to the breath coming in, the breath going out? And how about experimenting with different ways of breathing? One way of breathing may feel okay because you're used to it, but unless you really try other ways of breathing, you don't know how good good can be.

As for restlessness, that calms down when you can find something that feels really good inside. There's a sense of refreshment, a sense of ease that comes when you stay steadily with the breath. And as with thoughts of sensual desire, you've been worried about things, you've been anxious about things, restless about things in the past. These thoughts are nothing new. Even though they come in, you don't really have to deal with them right now. Put them aside for the time being. If they insist that they're really important, tell them, "Come back later, we'll talk things over after the meditation." But for the time being you want the mind to get in good shape. That way, if the issue is something important that you really have to think through, the mind after meditation will be strong, clear, alert, more likely to do a good job of the thinking.

As for uncertainty or doubt, the best way deal with that is to really look carefully at what you're doing. You know the breath is coming in; you know it's going out. Hold on to that. Is the breath comfortable? Experiment. There's only

one way to overcome doubt, and that's through experimenting. It may not seem like much of a beachhead against doubt and uncertainty, but you'd be surprised what you learn by really looking carefully at your actions, giving them your full attention, being very meticulous about what you do.

This is why there's so little going on in the monastery compared to the world outside: so that you can focus intently on what you're actually doing, see clearly what you're doing. If you know one thing really thoroughly, it connects with a lot of other things. But if you know a lot of things only superficially, there's no real connection. The knowledge doesn't penetrate—doesn't penetrate the things, doesn't penetrate your mind.

This is why the quality of *citta* or intentness is really important in the practice. If you pay only half a mind to what you are doing, you don't even get to see half of what's out there, and you can see only a tiny, tiny fraction of what's in here.

When they talk about the path and the goal being one, the most useful way of thinking about that is that you don't sit here walking on the path and looking ahead to see where the goal is, or looking up again and again and again to see when it's going to come. It's going to come right here where you're following the path: That's where things are going to appear, i.e., right here where the mind and the body meet, right at the breath. If anything is going to appear, it's going to appear right here, right where you're working on the path, right where you're monitoring how things are going. So remember to stay focused right here.

That's one of the functions of mindfulness. You keep something in mind and then you use what you're keeping in mind to judge what's actually happening right here. If you find that you're sticking with the breath as you intended, that's fine. If not, you make adjustments. That's how mindfulness and right effort come together. It's that quality of ardency described in the basic formula for mindfulness.

I was reading a book the other day talking about how mindfulness has one function, and right effort has another function. If you want to do pure mindfulness practice, you have to ignore right effort—i.e., if you see something unskillful coming up, you don't do anything about it. But that doesn't fit in with the way the Buddha taught. The Buddha taught that right effort, right mindfulness, right concentration all have to work together if they're going to get results.

So when you keep in mind the fact that you want to stay with the breath, and you notice that the mind is wandering off, you don't just let it wander off. You bring it right back and you try to figure how you can keep it here. It can't be just through force of will. You want to make the breath comfortable so that it's more

inviting, more appealing, so that you can actually generate the desire to stick with it. That's part of right effort right there. The more consistently you stay here, then the more concentration develops.

So all these factors—right effort, right mindfulness, and right concentration—have to work together if you're going to gain any results. And it's not necessary that you draw distinct lines between them. Bring them together. The mindfulness and the effort slough into the concentration, and the path all comes together. The more intent you are in really observing what's going on, the more you understand. Bring all your wits to bear and try to figure out: What is this body? What is this mind? How do they interact in ways that, even though you want to find pleasure and happiness in life, you keep running into suffering? Why is that? What are they doing? What are you doing with them? All the processes you need to master in terms of dealing with the body, dealing with the mind, are right here. All the qualities you need to develop, you've got them, at least in potential form, and you want to develop them.

This is why it's important that you pay full attention to what you're doing, and be as consistent as possible in maintaining that intention, because otherwise there'd be huge holes and gaps in your knowledge, and it may not seem like much. There are lots of other things going on in the world right now, but what use is having knowledge about all those things in the world if it's superficial? Like the stuff you read in the newspapers and gain through the media: It's all something that someone else wants us to know or wants us to think. You have to wonder exactly why? So that kind of knowledge is really questionable. The things we need to know are the things we're doing right here, right now, and yet we don't pay attention right here right now, so we don't really know them. But there is the potential for real knowledge if you really focus in, stay focused, value this practice, and not treat it casually. It's the people who are really intent on the little things who come face-to-face with the big things in life.

Ajaan Lee makes a comparison. He says the Buddha became a great person, but how did he become a great person? He first made himself very small. He focused in on his breath, saying that he had to get to know this one thing really well—the mind focused on the breath—and then develop all the skills that go around that. As for you, you develop this not only by focusing on the breath, but also by focusing on any activity you have to do in the course of the day. Give your actions your full attention. Be deliberate, be circumspect in what you're doing, and those qualities of deliberation and circumspection will connect, become more and more habitual, more and more reliable.

So give this your full attention. It may not seem like much. Part of the mind keeps saying, “What about what’s going on over there? How about if I do this? How about if I went there?” It skims around on the surface. You want to really dig down in one spot. That’s how you get to know the deeper layers. And you realize the most important things anywhere are the important things right here, right now. So you’ve got this right here right now. You’ve got the body sitting here breathing; you’ve got the mind thinking and aware. If you want to get the full use out of these things, you’ve got to give them your full attention. It’s only in this way that you can break through your ignorance and see what’s on the other side.