

Mindfulness & Effort

February 1, 2011

Pose the question in your mind, “What kind of breathing would feel good right now? What kind of breathing would feel nourishing?” And see how the body responds.

If it doesn't respond in any particular way, you can try adjusting the breath to see what kind of results you get. Think, “longer breathing,” and let the body breathe in a nice, long, deep rhythm for a while. See how that feels. If it doesn't feel good, you can try shorter; more shallow; heavier, lighter; faster, slower. You can emphasize different parts of the body as you breathe in. You might think of using your shoulders more to breathe; or using your diaphragm; breathing down, down, down into the intestines; or even further, down through your legs, out to your feet.

Explore this process of breathing, because it's nourishing for the mind and nourishing for the body. If you pay careful attention, you get even more nourishment out of it. Otherwise, the breath simply functions to keep you going and that's about it. But if you give it space to take up all of your attention and all of the body, you find that it's more nourishing. It gives you a good place to stay, a good place to gain your nourishment.

The breath is food in a way. It's a good object for the mind. The mind likes to feed on its objects, so you give it something good to feed on. Here you're feeding on the sensation of the breathing and also on the good intentions that go into keeping you with the present moment.

Because the most nourishing food for the mind is just that: its intentions. We tend to go for sensory pleasures—nice sights, nice sounds, smells, tastes, tactile sensations—but our intentions are what give us real nourishment. You intend to do something good and you see that it's got good results: That gives you nourishment to go on for a long, long time. If all you have are comfortable sensations in the sense of beautiful things to look at or nice things to listen to, but the mind is empty of good intentions, it all becomes very meaningless. You begin to realize: This is just physical stuff. And the physicality of it all, the brute unknowingness of the physical world, begins to get to you. It doesn't go anywhere, doesn't really do anything, doesn't accomplish anything—just cycles through.

Go and look the canyons in Utah. Right now they're sandstone. Bit by bit the sandstone wears down into sand and goes to the sea. Then the sand under the sea, when it gets glued together with carbonate, becomes sandstone again. And then

that will wear down again. It just goes around and around and around like this. It doesn't really go anywhere. That's the way it is with the physical side of the world.

The only real nourishment you can find is in the mental side. We hope that we can feed off other people's good intentions, but those are really undependable. The pleasure we get from other people: The Buddha said that's like borrowed goods. They can take it back anytime they want. The only real nourishment for the mind comes from the good intentions you develop.

Like right now: You're intending to be mindful, alert, trying to get the mind focused, develop concentration. These are all good things for the mind. They're nourishment. It feels really good.

All the Buddha's teachings are focused on this issue of intention. When you give something and you know that it was a good gift—it was given with pure motives and the person who received it made good use of it: That feels really good. When you feel tempted to break the precepts and see that you've got the chance that you could easily get away with it and yet you don't do it: There's a real sense of self-worth that comes from that. That is really nourishing for the mind. It can keep you going through all kinds of other difficulties. Sights can be unpleasant; sounds can be unpleasant; the world can be unpleasant; other people's attitudes, other people's actions can be unpleasant, but if you've been acting on good intentions yourself, that keeps you going. You don't get depressed by how venal the world can be, because you know you've got something good inside.

This is what we want to emphasize as we meditate: What is your intention here? Right now the intention is to explore the breath so that you can develop good qualities of mind. Learn how to develop a sense of ease and well-being that doesn't need to take anything away from anyone else at all. This is the smallest footprint imaginable. You're just sitting here breathing and you're happy.

There's that comment Stephen Colbert made one time, "Buddhism? You wrap yourself up in a cloth and you sit under a tree and you breathe?" Well, yeah. That's what we do. And we find happiness doing it. We find that we can nourish the mind doing that. Because it's the quality of mind that you bring to the breathing and the sitting under the tree: That's what makes all the difference.

So the breath you're looking at right now is basically the same kind of breath the Buddha was looking at the night of his awakening. What was the difference? It was the amount of attention he brought to it and the questions he asked and the things he noticed, the qualities of mind he developed, all of which are things that we can do, too. But the foundation is right here, developing a sense of well-being here in the present moment.

All too often, there's the idea that awakening comes by stringing yourself out

until you reach the end of your rope, and then, in desperation, you go for awakening. Well, that's not the pattern the Buddha set forth. You bring the mind to balance with a sense of well-being, a sense of completeness. That's one of his words to describe awakening: completion. Everything comes to the culmination of its potential. In fact, that was his actual last word: achieve completion—in which the factors of the path are all fully developed and they all support one another.

So it begins by learning how to support the mind with its good intentions, its skillful intentions. Right now the skillful intention is to stay with the breath, explore the breath, get to know it. Allow your awareness to fill the body. And notice how the breath feels in the different parts of the body. In any place where it feels tedious or tiresome, allow it to relax. Where there's any sense of blockage, allow it to dissolve away. Any parts of the body that seem to be starved of breath energy, give them as much as they want. Think of all the cells in the body being full of energy, all the way through the in-breath, all the way through the out-. Don't squeeze things out as you breathe out. Even when you breathe out, try to maintain a sense of fullness. That's what allows a sense of ease and well-being, a sense of refreshment, to develop.

That's what you can really feed on. That's the best kind of feeding there is, because it doesn't take anything away from anyone else, doesn't oppress anybody. And yet it provides a sense of nourishment that feels good deep down.