

Anchored in the Present

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There are four frames of reference for establishing mindfulness: the body in and of itself, feelings in and of themselves, the mind in and of itself, and mental qualities or mental events in and of themselves.

They're not very far apart from one another. In fact, when the Buddha talks about the best way to develop all four of them, he says to focus on the breath. He doesn't say that when you've had enough of the breath, then you drop the breath and focus on feelings or mind or whatever. You basically stay with the breath all the way through.

It's part of the formula, "keeping focused on the body in and of itself—ardent, alert, and mindful—putting aside greed and distress with reference to the world." The breath, of course, is an aspect of the body in and of itself. The activity of staying focused on the breath contains the activity of attention. The act of attention to the breath, the Buddha says, counts as a kind of feeling, which is kind of a strange statement, but apparently it relates to the fact that every feeling has an element of fabrication. In this case, the attention is the fabrication. As you're staying with the breath, you'll notice certain feelings that come up around the breath that you wouldn't have noticed otherwise. They wouldn't have registered.

As you stay with the breath consistently, it gives rise to feelings of ease that you can then spread throughout the body. All of this starts with that act of attention. So when attending to the breath, you've got the feeling right there.

Then the Buddha says that you can't stay with the breath unless you have good mindfulness and good alertness. Those are states of mind.

And as you're abandoning greed and distress, you have to learn how to watch that act of abandoning with equanimity. That equanimity is a mental quality.

So all frames of reference are there as you're focused on the breath. You don't leave the breath to look at the others. It's just that you take that activity of staying focused on the breath and you learn how to step back a bit and watch it.

At the same time, you use it as your post or stake to keep the mind tied in the present moment.

The Buddha gives the analogy of six different animals: a crocodile, a monkey, a hyena, a dog, a snake, and a bird. If you took them, put leashes on each of them, and then tied the leashes together into a knot, then it would simply be a matter of whichever one was the strongest would pull of all the other ones along in the direction it wanted to go. If the crocodile decided it wanted to go down to the

water, everybody would be dragged down to the water. And you know what happens, of course, when monkeys and hyenas and birds get dragged into the water: They drown.

But if you take all those leashes and tie them to a post or a stake, then no matter how much they pull, they're going to have to stay right there next to the stake. Ultimately, they lie down right next to the stake.

This is basically what we're doing as we focus on the breath. We're providing the mind with a stake to keep it in reference to the present moment.

Otherwise, when you want to start looking at the mind or at feelings, it's all too easy to get pulled away. You're angry about this, upset about that, fearful about this, and then you go off into that thought world.

So what we're doing is trying to create the breath as a steady place to stay and center our attention on the breath. The breath is always coming in and out, but you have to make sure that your attention is always here as well. When you're with the breath, you know you're with the present moment.

Then you try to create a space with the breath filling the whole body, along with the sense of ease that comes with your attention to the breath filling the whole body. That allows the mind to settle down.

This way, whatever thoughts do come up, you can watch them simply as things bubbling up and then disappearing. You're not taking them for real. You're not getting involved in them. That allows you to focus more and more on where those thoughts are coming from.

Thoughts are like a magician. The magician does all these things to distract you so that you don't see what he's actually doing. Sometimes he's doing things right in front of your eyes but you don't see them because he's got some other little trick to pull your attention away from what's happening right here.

This is what the mind does. It gives you something really interesting to pull your attention away from what's right here. Even when it's not all that interesting, there's something about our thoughts that no matter how dull they are, we always seem to be fascinated by them.

And what is there to them? Not all that much. But somehow the fact that it comes out of us... The analogy they give sometimes in Thailand is that they're like your own farts. Other people's farts are horrible, oppressive, but yours are not so bad.

So what we're doing as we meditate is to give the mind something that's more interesting: the breath, the energy in the body.

When you're engaged with the breath, and a thought comes, in you begin to see: There's really nothing much to it, just something bubbling up and going away.

You start looking for the process that creates the thought. That's a lot more interesting than the content of the thought. How the mind creates these little worlds is a really interesting process. But, to see it, you've first got to get the mind settled down.

One of our problems as meditators is that we're often in too much of a hurry. We want to move on to the insights that are supposed to liberate us and we don't want to do the work needed to get the groundwork really solid. As a result, what happens? Some thought comes along and just pulls us away.

Or we see one thought and we manage to not get pulled away by that and we get so proud of not being pulled away that that pride pulls us away.

So whatever comes up, you've got to stay right here, right here. Try to get really interested in the breath. It's your anchor in the present moment.

It's also your protection, not only against the energies coming out of your own mind but also against energies you might have otherwise picked up from other people. It enables you to go through the day safely. You've got your body filled with your breath energy, so there's no room for other people's energies to intrude.

At the same time, you improve the circulation to the different organs in the body.

There are lots of benefits that come from staying with the breath and learning to work with it, getting interested in it, looking at this process of fabrication in the body.

This way, when you're staying in the present moment, it's not with a sense of being tied down. You realize there's something interesting going on here.

You want to look at your intentions; you want to look at all the other elements that go up to make up the present moment. The first way to see your intentions is to set an intention to stay with the breath and do your best to maintain it.

That's when you see all these other intentions coming in—other members of the committee who seemed to be with the program but they were just biding their time. When they see that they've got their chance, they move in. If you hadn't had a firmly placed intention to begin with, you wouldn't have noticed it.

There are trains of thought that head off in all sorts of directions, and usually you're hopping from one train to another. At first, it looks like you're going to go to New York, but then you hop on another train that's going down to Miami, then to another train that's going to go to Abilene, Texas. Your trains of thought go all over the place. They're those animals that are pulling in different directions.

So try to get interested in the breath. Remind yourself of all the good reasons for why you're trying to work with the breath energy. And get really, really solid here.

That way, when you do decide to look at the feeling side of this process or the mind side of this process, it's not going to pull you away.

In fact, staying with the breath, you're going to *have* to deal with feelings, you're going to *have* to deal with mind states. If you find that you're having trouble settling down, you've got to deal with that mind state for the purpose of getting back to the breath. Or if there are feelings of dis-ease in the body or dis-ease in the mind, you've got to work with the breath to improve those feelings, to give yourself a better place to settle down.

But in all these cases, your best way of dealing with problems in terms of feelings, your problems in terms of the mind, or your problems in terms of distraction is, "What's the breath like?"

Ajaan Fuang used to say that this is the key to our skill here. Whatever problem comes up, your first question should be, "How does it relate to the breath?" Feelings? Mind states? Distractions? Keep coming back to the breath, back to the breath.

Try to learn as much as you can about the various ways of breathing and the impact they have on different parts of the body, on different conditions in the mind.

Make this the center of your skill. Then all the other elements, all the other frames of reference, will come gathering around. And anything you need to know, you'll know right here.