

Putting Aside the World

June 9, 2012

When you meditate, there are things you have to hold on to and things you have to let go. Actually they're not things, they're activities. Holding on means that you stick with the activity; letting go means if you see that you're repeating the activity, you try to stop.

The activity you want to stick with right now is staying with the breath. Take a couple of good, long, deep in-and-out breaths to establish where you're feeling the breathing right now. Think of the breath as a full-body process, simply that some parts of it are more apparent than others, easier to watch than others. Focus on the ones that are easiest to watch. Wherever you feel the energy of the breath flowing as you breathe in, where you feel it when you breathe out: Focus on those parts of the body.

And let your focus be just right. You don't want to focus so heavily that you clamp down on these things to the point where they start getting too tight or too tense. At the same time, you don't want to be so casual or light in your focus that you drift off.

You want to stay with the breath consistently: all the way through the in-breath, all the way through the out-, wherever you feel the energy in the body—and even in-between, when the breath isn't coming in or going out. Between the out-breath and the in-breath and between the in-breath and the out-breath: Try to stay right there.

Allow the breath to be comfortable. If it doesn't feel comfortable, think of its getting longer or shorter, deeper, more shallow, heavier, lighter—anything that would give a sense of greater satisfaction to the body, in terms of what the body needs in terms of breath energy right now. If you're feeling tired, try to breathe in a way that's more energizing. If you're feeling tense, try to breathe in a way that's more relaxed.

You have no other cares right now, no other responsibilities. That's the second part, the things you have to let go of: whatever issues you may have out in the world with regard to your family or your work. The formula the Buddha has is, "putting aside greed and distress with reference to the world." Many times the world can be *really* heavy, weighing heavily on you. Just the idea of the world: It's huge. You're not Atlas. You can't hold the whole globe on your shoulders. And yet we try to. That's where we go wrong. We have to realize that no matter how big the problems are, or how there's nobody else to deal with them, there are times when

you have to put them aside. Otherwise, your mind just gets crushed.

Part of letting go is realizing that the world is made up of what? It's made up of sights, sounds, smells, tastes, tactile sensations, and ideas: That's it. That's all you know of the world right now: these activities. At the moment, a lot of them are just memories. So instead of thinking of the world out there, just tell yourself every time a memory comes up: "That's just a memory coming through the mind," or just a worry about the future, or whatever it is.

Remind yourself that for right now, you're not responsible. Meditating is a larger way of being responsible, because it allows you to strengthen yourself. If you really do have responsibilities out there, you're going to be in better shape to deal with them. But for the time being, you've got to drop those things. You can't let them interfere with staying with the breath.

There may be members of the family you feel responsible for, but there's that interesting passage where the Buddha says there's nobody out there that you're likely to meet who hasn't been your mother at some point. There's nobody who hasn't been your father, your brother, your sister, your son, your daughter. He teaches you that not so that you have a sense of a large wonderful family all over the world. He says that when you think about it, it's pretty dismaying. You've had all these attachments, all these relationships and then what happens? They end. Each person goes his or her separate way. When you meet up again, you don't know each other. In that way, our relatives are actually strangers.

There's another passage where there's a woman who's lost her daughter and is in the cemetery grieving over her. And the Buddha says to her, "Your daughter: Do you know how many daughters you've had who you've buried in this cemetery? There are thousands."

In another case, where a woman had lost her son, the Buddha asked her, "Where did the son come from when you had him? You have no idea. Where did he go after he left? You have no idea again." We're like ships meeting in the night, passing, and then going who-knows-where.

He's not saying this to be heartless or unfeeling but simply to put everything into perspective: that there will come a time when your responsibilities for these other people will have to end. And each of us has his or her own karma.

This is why putting aside greed and distress with reference to the world involves developing equanimity. Equanimity is not hard-heartedness or cold-heartedness. It's simply the realization that there are certain areas where we can't do things for other people. There are things even in our own lives that we can't control.

It's so much more the case with the people you love, the people you're

responsible for. They're making choices on their own that you can't have any influence on. You try, you try, you try, and they resist.

You have to realize that your main responsibility is right here, looking after your own mind. Whatever you do beyond that is a gift. But the gift can only go so far. And it's going to be a better gift if your mind is in good shape.

So again, putting aside these feelings of responsibility for the time being is not a selfish or an irresponsible thing. It's better for everybody that you learn how to find a sense of well-being inside. Otherwise, your help for others gets neurotic. You're trying to prove certain things that may or may not be good for the other person.

When you have a sense of well-being, part of the goodness is that it is detectable. Even if people don't speak of it or can't even think of it consciously, there is a subconscious impact of a peaceful mind, of a stable mind. That's a huge gift right there.

So the equanimity here is informed by goodwill. This is why the Buddha teaches those four attitudes—universal goodwill, compassion, empathetic joy, and equanimity—as a set. They all come together. It's a question of knowing which one to emphasize at which time, but they all work together. We have equanimity because we have goodwill; we have goodwill because we have equanimity. These qualities need each other. The same with compassion and empathetic joy: They all work together, so that goodwill doesn't become sentimental and clingy, and equanimity doesn't become cold-hearted.

Right now, try to develop equanimity for all the things that would pull you away from the breath. No matter how serious the responsibilities may be, they pale by comparison with your responsibility for looking after your own mind. This is something nobody else can do for you. And if you don't do it now, when are you going to do it?

So take the time to clear away the other issues in your life and focus right here, right now. Try to sensitize yourself to the range of breath energies in the body. If they're allowed to work together and be coordinated, you've got a free source of energy inside. If your energies are working at cross-purposes, you weaken yourself.

So when you breathe in, think of the whole body being nourished altogether. When you breathe out, think of the nourishment filling the body even as the breath goes out. The part that goes out is the negative part. The unhealthy breath energies just dissipate into the air. The healthy ones come in and they stay, stay, stay, and they build up. That way, you develop a sense of fullness, a sense of refreshment.

As the Buddha said, this refreshment comes from the attention you give to

your breath, which means that you don't have to turn your attention to the fullness or the pleasure. You know they're there, but you don't want to gobble them down.

Otherwise, it's like someone who gets a job, gets his first pay check, and then just runs off, leaves his job, leaves his family, and has a good time with the money. Of course, the money's going to run out. He'll be lucky if he can come back and get the job again. And even if he does get the job but he keeps on doing this, he's never going to advance. So keep at the work and pile up the money. Use it as you need it for your enjoyment. But you keep at the work all the time. Otherwise, the money's going to run out.

When you pay attention to the breath, the pleasure's there in the background; the rapture's there in the background. The refreshment, all the good things that you're creating by working with the breath energy: They're all there. You benefit from them without your having to gobble them down. The gobbling doesn't help.

So stay right here with this sense of the breath energy. You might explore down the arms, out to the fingers; down the torso, through the hips, out through the legs, out through the toes. Pose that question: "Is there anybody in here who's not getting enough breath energy?" See if you can detect parts of the body that seem to be starved. Look up in the head, the area of the brain, think of all the breath energy the brain needs. Think of all the channels—your eyes, your ears, everything—opening up.

Any vagrant thoughts that may come through, just let them pass by, pass by. You don't have to get involved. Even though they may say, "Hey, we're thoughts about the world. The world is big, the world is important," remember the world is just thoughts at this moment. Try to keep things simple. Break big problems down into little problems so that you can handle them.

That's how you develop your mindfulness and concentration together. As the formula says, you remain focused on the body in and of itself—that's the breath—ardent, alert, and mindful. *Mindful* means you keep remembering to stay here. *Alert* means you watch what's going on. And *ardent* means that you want to handle this well, you want to handle this with skill. You're not just watching willy-nilly whatever comes up and letting yourself be victimized by whatever comes up.

Think of the old Thai legend of Sri Thanonchai. When he was a little kid, he had a younger brother and was jealous of the younger brother. His parents left the house one day and they said, "Look. Watch your brother," meaning, "Look after him." But he decided to take them literally, "Okay, I just have to watch." The brother started eating poison and Sri Thanonchai just watched. The brother fell off the porch, he just watched. Of course, that's not what the parents meant. When

you watch your brother, you look after him, you keep him out of danger.

It's the same with your mind. You watch your mind, you look after it. If you see that it's getting tied up with greed and distress with reference to the world, you learn how to put those things aside.

At the same time, you learn how to stay with the breath in a way that makes it more interesting, that makes it more captivating, so that it really does give a sense of well-being, nourishment, energizing the mind, energizing the body.

You have to look at the Buddha's whole formula. It's not just watching or just being alert or not just being attentive. Stay with the body in and of itself, ardent, alert and mindful, putting aside greed and distress with reference to the world. When you do the whole formula you're going to get the whole results.

You've got this whole hour now to benefit from just doing this one thing—holding on to this activity of being with the breath, evaluating the breath, experimenting with the breath, developing interest in the breath—and putting aside any other mental events or activities that would pull you away. They're not your responsibility right now. Your responsibility is your mind, your inner sense of well-being. So look after it.