

## *Behind the Scenes*

*April 1, 2016*

One of the reasons why we start the meditation with thoughts of goodwill for all beings in all directions—along with thoughts of compassion, empathetic joy, and equanimity—is to put the mind in the right frame to meditate. Otherwise, we bring the issues of the day into our meditation. Instead of focusing on the breath, we focus on what we did or somebody else did in the course of the day. And we could feed on that kind of thing for an hour, yet we wouldn't gain the benefits from the meditation.

So we try to put things into the proper perspective. Think of all living beings in all directions, and how, on the one hand, you'd like to see them happy. And on the other hand, how what everybody does is the result of their actions. There are cases where you'd like to see somebody happy and you can't make it happen, either because of limitations on your abilities or limitations on theirs. But if you keep banging your head against that particular fact, you waste the time and the energy that you could put to working on areas where you can make a difference.

Thinking of all the issues of all the beings in the world helps put your issues into perspective. A lot of the things that loom very large in the course of your day suddenly seem very small.

And those two considerations right there help get you in the mood to meditate. You want a harmless happiness, so you focus on the source of harmless happiness: your mind. You realize that everything depends on actions, so you want to focus your attention on areas where you can make a difference. Well, this is the big place where you can make a difference: your own mind right here in the present moment. And as for the issues that would pull you away, you want to see them as small so that you really can give your attention to what's happening with the breath right now.

We use the breath as an anchor for the mind to stay in the present moment. We try to make the breath as comfortable as we can to make the present moment a nice place to stay. If the breath feels labored—if it feels too tight, too short, too long—you're not going to want to stay. It'll be one more reason to leave. So watch for a while to see what kind of breathing feels best for the body right now. What are the body's needs? When you breathe in, start asking yourself questions about the process of breathing in, breathing out: When you breathe in, where does the impulse to breathe in start? And how do you know when to stop and rest and

then let the breath go out? What are the sensations that tell you that? Where are they in the body?

After all, there's a lot more to the breath than just the air coming in and out through the nose. There's the whole movement of energy in the body. It comes in waves over the body. Try to find where the waves begin, where they end, and then how they begin again. In fact, the movement of energy in the body is how you directly experience the breath. And you can feel it anywhere. Try to notice where you feel it. You can feel it most prominently in different parts of the body at different times. This is something very individual with each of us.

So put aside your preconceived notions of which parts of the body are involved with the breath and which ones are not, and just notice: Where do you feel it—the breathing process? And does it feel comfortable? Does it feel open and spacious, or does it feel tight and constricted? You can experiment with different kinds of breathing, but try to experiment in a way that doesn't add more constriction. Just pose the question in the mind: What would feel good right now, longer breathing or shorter? How about faster or slower? Heavier or lighter? And see which direction the body seems to incline, and then watch it for a while. If it really does feel good, keep up that rhythm as long as it feels good. Try to get as interested as you can in the breath. That helps cut through any of your fascination with going back and thinking about things of the day, things of tomorrow, all those worlds that the mind creates.

Because even more interesting than the breath are the processes in the mind. We're both the creator and the watcher: the creator and the audience of all the little plays or movies we create in the mind. And those movies can have a huge impact on us. This is where our actions come from. You visualize yourself doing something and then you decide whether it's worth doing it or not. When you meditate, the question is, "How do you create that image? And is it a reliable image? And who's doing the building? Who's doing the deciding?" You want to get interested in this, because otherwise you're just watching movies all the time.

And it's not an innocent process, because sometimes the movies will inspire you to do things you later regret. So you have to watch out. Think of yourself as being behind stage, instead of out in the audience. You get to see how the play is put on and you begin to see how artificial it all is. That helps you see through some of the illusion.

But, at the same time, you can get fascinated: This is how they put on plays. This is how they create the illusion. It's like those DVD's they sell with movies on them. They'll often put an extra little documentary on at the end about how the movie was made. And oftentimes, the documentary on the making of the movie is

much more interesting than the movie itself, especially the movies with all the special effects, because often they lack an awful lot in terms of dialogue or subtlety of character development. But all the intricacies that go into making those movies can be really fascinating.

In fact, you look at most of human creations and the actual making of things is a lot more interesting than the thing that results. Occasionally, you'll hear of exceptions, things where the making is kind of disappointing because the effect was so good. I was reading recently about some of Beethoven's conversation notebooks when he was deaf. And during the period when he was writing the *Missa Solemnis*, his main concerns were with his health, his liver, and other really petty, petty things. And yet, this was the time that he was writing the *Missa Solemnis*. So that's one of the rare cases where the actual work of art comes out more interesting than the process, or at least what's recorded of the process.

You can think about it, though. Here he was deaf and yet he was creating this amazing music. How that process worked in his mind is something nobody understands. But for most of us, it's like—what, they have a new movie out now with Superman versus Batman. I mean, it sounds really, really stultifying. But you can imagine that the making of the movie was more interesting than the actual movie.

A lot of our thoughts are like that: the way greed, aversion, and delusion go into the creation of a mind state, and how they disguise themselves as something else. And there's the question: How is it that we're both the creator of these mind states and the observer of the mind states, and yet we fall for them? How is it that we cover things up? It's like when they put on a play. They have to close the curtains when they change the scenery, because otherwise it'll destroy the illusion. They don't want you to see the actors backstage smoking and chatting before they come on, because that would destroy the illusion. Well, the mind has a lot of curtains like that, a lot of backstage areas like that. And after seeing the range of plays it puts on or the range of movies it puts on, there comes a point where you decide, "Let's go backstage. Let's watch the process."

Get fascinated by that because that's what you want to learn how to take apart. Because otherwise, you fall for your illusions again and again and again. The basic things that defile the mind are not that intricate: there's greed, there's aversion, and there's delusion. That's pretty much it: one of the three or any combination of the three. And yet those combinations can get very complex. You want to learn how to take things back to the simple terms so that the mind doesn't fool itself, so that you don't end up doing things that you're later going to regret. You don't end up creating suffering.

This is the main focus of the Buddha's teachings: the fact that even though we all want happiness, however we define it, we end up creating a lot of suffering for ourselves. And all too often, we're hardly even aware that we're responsible for it. We hide it from ourselves. It's when you can see the process and take it apart and be really honest with yourself that it isn't really worth the effort: That's when you can let go. That's when you can see through a lot of these illusions that the mind creates.

That way, you can free yourself from them—because there is a freedom that does lie beyond these things. We obscure our vision of that potential because we spend all our time entertaining ourselves with this idea, that idea, this movie, that movie. You want a comedy. You want a drama. Some science fiction. You want a horror film. We think it's an innocent pastime, but often the way we see things and the movies we create are really going to have an impact on what we do, where we look for satisfaction in our lives. And for the most part, we end up disappointed.

So learn to become fascinated in what's going on in the present moment. Learn how to anchor yourself here with a sense of well-being so that you can look into these processes. You'll find that what's actually happening right here, right now, is a lot more interesting than the movies you create.

They have a term in Thailand for the kind of films that follow the same pattern over and over again: They call them stagnant water films. And most of our thoughts are that: stagnant water thoughts—the same theme, the same plot, over and over again. It's a lot more interesting to see how these things are created and why the mind falls for them. When you can understand that, you've learned something of real value and interest.