

Skillful Fear

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Meditation is an issue both of technique and of values. The technique: Close your eyes, sit with your back straight, place your hands in your lap, and focus on your breathing. Take a couple of good, long, deep in-and-out breaths, and notice where you feel the breathing process in the body. Then you can ask yourself: Is it comfortable? If it's not, what would you change? Would you make it longer still? Or would you make it shorter? Or in long, out short? In short, out long? Deeper, more shallow? Heavier, lighter? Faster, slower?

There are lots of different ways you can breathe. Try to see what the body needs right now. If it needs more energy, try to breathe in a way that emphasizes the in-breath. If you're tense or tight, breathe in a way that's more relaxing. You might emphasize the out-breath. Let the breath have its freedom. Otherwise, if it feels tight or constricted, think of it opening up. Think of the whole body breathing—not just air coming in and out of the lungs, but an energy coming in and out through all the pores of the skin and going through all the blood vessels and nerves in the body.

When they talk about the wind element or the breath element in the Canon, that's what they're talking about: the flow of energy in the body. As you get more sensitive to it, you realize that it's not just the air coming in and out through the nose, but there's a sense of flow in the different parts of the body. In some places, it may seem blocked or restricted, in which case think of the breath either going through it or going around it, so that it feels good for the whole body just to be sitting here breathing.

Try to expand your awareness so that it fills the whole body, so that you've got the whole body breathing and you've got your awareness throughout the whole body. See if you can maintain that. Your awareness will have a tendency to shrink, so keep reminding yourself each time you breathe in, "whole body"; each time you breathe out, "whole body." If staying with the whole body is too much, go through the body section by section first and familiarize yourself with how the breathing process feels in different parts of the body, and then try whole body again.

That's the technique. In doing it, you get the mind to settle down, to have a sense of stillness. The mind is clearer because it's not cluttered with a lot of thoughts. It's centered and your awareness is broad. It's the kind of awareness

that's good for the body, good for the mind—and you can see things going on in your mind that you wouldn't have seen otherwise.

This is where we get into the values, because sometimes you're sitting here with the breath and something else comes up. Your immediate instinct is to say "What's this?" and then go with it, on the premise that any thought is more interesting than the breath. But there are good thoughts and bad thoughts, thoughts that are worth thinking and thoughts that are not worth thinking, and you want to have a place where you can sit and watch the process of a thought forming so that you can decide: Would you really want to go with it or not? With some thoughts, it's easy to say "No." Others have more of a hook. They're covered with Velcro. As soon as they come up, you're stuck on them, and you go with them, regardless.

Yesterday we were talking about fear and anxiety. There's a part of the mind that believes that if you're anxious and worried about things, then you're better prepared for the future than if you weren't, so when anxiety comes up, you run with it because you think it's useful or something you should be engaged in. But first you've got to realize that the future is extremely uncertain. What you *do* know is that you need to be prepared for unexpected things, and qualities of mind like mindfulness and alertness are really helpful when the unexpected happens. So when you're working with the breath, that's precisely what you're doing: You're strengthening your mindfulness; you're strengthening your alertness. So being with the breath is not a waste of time, and it's not leaving you exposed to future dangers. It's actually training the mind in the skills it needs so that when something unexpected comes, you're in a better position to deal with it.

Then there's the whole issue of fear. There are skillful fears and unskillful fears, and skillful ways of protecting yourself and unskillful ways of protecting yourself. As the Buddha once said, the main things to fear are that you develop wrong views and that you lose your virtue. In other words, you break the precepts—you kill, steal, engage in illicit sex, tell lies, take intoxicants, engage in divisive speech or harsh speech. When you engage in these things, you've lost your virtue, and that's an important possession, more important than your material possessions.

The same with right view: Right view basically starts with the view that your actions really do make a difference, and that you are responsible for your actions. They make a difference in your life, and it can be a long-term difference. You also have the freedom to choose how to act. Now, you may have to make some sacrifices to do the right thing. This is why, as the Buddha said, loss of relatives, loss of wealth, even loss of your health is nothing compared to loss of your virtue, loss of your right view. So if you're going to make your happiness and your sense

of security depend on something, make them depend on right view and your virtue.

There are some suttas in the Canon where King Pasenadi comes to see the Buddha. King Pasenadi is something of a naïf when it comes to spiritual issues, but gradually he's beginning to learn some lessons. One day, he's saying to the Buddha, "You know, I realize that people who protect themselves with armies are not really protected, because they can still do really unskillful things, and those unskillful things will come back at them. No army can stop it." So if your happiness depends on the kinds of things that need armies to protect them, it's really unstable, because your health, your wealth, even the life of your relatives depends on a lot of factors that are beyond your control, but your right views and your right actions are things you *can* control.

This is why the Buddha says we're the owners of our actions. If you're going to identify with anything, identify with the fact that you're making choices and you want to make them skillfully. In fact, that's a healthy sense of self, because you do have some control here. As the Buddha pointed out, our sense of self comes from the sense of control. We've learned that we can control our bodies to some extent and from there we've learned different ways of speaking to influence other people, influence events.

Our sense of self develops with our sense of skill and our sense of control, but if your sense of self depends on controlling things that are really beyond your control, then you're setting yourself up for a problem, because even though we can control the body, say, for a while, there are a lot of things about it that we can't control. Your heart may malfunction. Your lungs may malfunction. Your kidneys may malfunction. Name whatever part of the body you've got, and it could malfunction. That's your body. Things outside of the body are even more beyond your control, and yet there are so many things out there on which we place our happiness. It's like taking a valuable and placing it on the roof of somebody's car. They can just drive off at any time.

So one of the values that go with the meditation is that the really important things in life have to be things that you can have at least some control over, and your choices are things you can control. Yet those are often areas where we relinquish control. We say, "Well, I need to work and I need to do this and I need to do that, so I have to sacrifice or compromise my values." Well, that's your choice. Yet what do you gain when you compromise your values? You gain some money, perhaps. You gain some status, power, whatever, but those things are extremely unstable. In the face of having made choices that lead to really bad long-term consequences, the gain turns into nothing. So there are times when it's

better to be poor, when it's better to sacrifice things so that you can maintain your virtue, maintain your right views.

If you're going to be afraid of anything, be afraid of the fact that you might sell out or you might compromise your virtue or you might give up on right views, saying, "I don't care about what my actions do in the long term. I want what I want right now." That's something really to be afraid of. That's when you leave yourself totally unprotected.

The Buddha never said that fear is a bad thing. I've had a number of psychotherapists ask me: "Why did the Buddha say unskillful thinking comes from greed, aversion, and delusion? Where is fear in the list?" Fear is not in the list because fear is not necessarily unskillful. There are things that are good to be afraid of. The fear gets unskillful when it's combined with greed or with aversion or with delusion. Those are the actual troublemakers.

So when fear comes up in the meditation, remind yourself of what's really worth being afraid of: loss of right view, loss of virtue. Then you remember how the fact that you're meditating makes it easier to maintain right view and easier to be careful about your virtue because you're developing something really good inside that's independent of wealth and independent of status and all the other things that the world has to offer that would pull you away from right view and your virtue.

When you can think in these ways, it's easier to come right back to the breath. If you've been wandering off into fear, you can come back, not simply by pulling yourself back, but by reminding yourself: "Okay, if you're going to be afraid of anything, be afraid of not being able to meditate properly, not gaining good concentration that will support your right view and support your virtue." This way, you use your discernment to take the underlying fear that we all have that things are unstable, things are inconstant, things are outside of our control, and use that fear to develop the skills that really will help us in the face of all the inconstancy and uncertainty in the world.

Your virtue, your concentration, your discernment: These things are your treasures. These things are your protection. The chant we had just now about the different forms of blessing: They're all forms of right action and right thinking, because the word *mangala* means not only blessing but also protection. It's good to look at the list. It gives you ideas of which areas in your life where your actions are unskillful are still leaving you unprotected, so that you can do something about it and make your protection all around.