

Driving Lessons

November 11, 2022

The Buddha's instructions for right concentration come in his description of right mindfulness: keeping track of the body in and of itself—ardent, alert, mindful—putting aside greed and distress with reference to the world. That describes two activities, and three qualities of mind you bring to them.

The two activities are, on the one hand, having a topic that you stay with: You keep track of the body in and of itself—which means the body not as it's related to the world, but simply in and of itself. You don't worry about how good-looking it is or how strong it is to do work in the world. It's simply the fact that you've got a body here right now.

What is it doing? Well, it's breathing, so focus on the breath in and of itself. Start with a couple of good long, deep in-and-out breaths, and notice where you *feel* the breathing in the body. By "breath" here, we're talking about the energy of the body that allows the air to come in and out through the nose. And you can sense that anywhere in the body. In fact, the more sensitive you get to the breath, the more you realize that it is a whole-body process.

But, in some places it's more prominent than others, more obvious than others. So, notice where it's obvious, and then ask yourself, "Is the breathing comfortable?" If long breathing feels good, keep it up. If not, you can change: You can try shorter breathing, or in short out long, in long out short, fast, slow, heavy, light, deep, shallow. Experiment to see what kind of breathing feels best for the body right now. When you find something that feels good, stick with it until it doesn't feel so good anymore. Then you can change.

Now, when it starts feeling good, try to expand your awareness so that it fills the whole body. You can either think of the whole body all at once—breathing in, breathing out. Or you can go through the body first, section by section. Try to be systematic about it. A good place to start is down around the navel, because that's an obvious area, where you feel the abdomen rise and fall.

With each part of the body, as you go through your survey, notice: How does it feel as you breathe in? How does it feel as you breathe out? What kind of breathing feels good in that part of the body?

You can move up to the solar plexus, the middle of the chest, the base of the throat, the middle of the head. And then, focusing on the back of the neck: Think of the breath entering there and going down the shoulders and out the arms, or going down the spine to the tailbone, and then down the legs.

You can survey the body as many times as you like until you feel you're ready to settle down. Then, choose any spot that feels good, allow your attention to settle there, and then, from that spot, to fill the whole body.

The purpose of this is to give the mind a good solid place to stay. When the Buddha describes right mindfulness, it's always a whole-body awareness, a whole-body process. The breath is a good way to develop that whole-body awareness because you have the breath filling the body, you have a feeling of ease filling the body, and your awareness filling the body—they're all there together. That's what you're trying to maintain.

Now, other thoughts may come in, which is why the Buddha recommends the second activity: You "put aside greed and distress with reference to the world." All the activities you've read about in the news, or experienced at work, with your family, even other activities here in our temporary monastery—just put them aside right now and just be with the breath in and of itself. Have no other concerns, no other interests right now.

Now, to do that, you need to develop three qualities, and that's where the ardent, alert, and mindful come in. Mindful means keeping something in mind. Sometimes you hear that it's a broad acceptance of whatever arises, but the Buddha never talked about it that way. Right mindfulness is a faculty of the memory. In particular, you're trying to remember things that are useful to remember right now as you try to get the mind into concentration. After all, as a meditator you've had some experience of how the mind can settle down—what works, what doesn't work—and you want to have that at hand. Not that you're running it through the mind all the time, but it's there in the background.

Then there's alertness: This is where you're aware of what's going on in the present moment, but not the present moment in general. Specifically, what are you *doing* in the present moment? What are your intentions right now? You try to maintain the intention to be with the breath, so this means you have to be alert to two things. One, the breath itself: How is the breath feeling? If you're going to develop a sense of well-being in the breath, you have to be here, right here experiencing it, sensitive to it, and not wandering off some place else.

And two, you also have to be aware of the mind: Is it wandering? Is it with the breath? If it wanders off, that's where you bring in the ardency—in other words, your desire to do this well. If the mind wanders off, you bring it right back. If it wanders off again, bring it back again. Ten times, a hundred times, just keep bringing it back.

Each time you come back, reward yourself with a breath that feels good—especially good—to remind yourself that you're here for the sake of a sense of well-being. Concentration is your *food* on the path. And the mind likes the food of a sense of well-being, ease, spaciousness inside.

While you're with the breath, ardency means that you try to be as sensitive as possible to how it feels. This is where you bring back your alertness. It's not just in, out, in, out. It's in comfortably, out comfortably, or in uncomfortably, out uncomfortably. If it's uncomfortable, what can you do to change it?

When the Buddha discusses ardency, it's basically the same as right effort, and right effort is very closely related to something called the four bases of success—attitudes you want to bring in as you're trying to do this well.

The first is *desire*: We have a desire to get results out of this practice. We're not here to show that we have no purpose in mind—we do have a purpose. And you want to be clear about that. But to attain what we want, we have to focus not on what we want, but on how to get there.

It's like driving down a road: If you're driving to a mountain on the horizon, you don't keep focused on the mountain. You focus on the road. If you focus on the mountain, you drive off the road, you run into people, create all kinds of trouble. So you focus on the road. You know this is the road that goes to the mountain and you just focus there. You keep going, making the next step, the next step. Or if you're driving, focus on where you turn left, where you turn right.

In this case, we're here to develop peace of mind, to gain insight, to understand why it is that we're causing unnecessary suffering for ourselves. To understand that, we have to get the mind to settle down so that it can observe itself clearly. And to get the mind to settle down, you've got to give it a good place to stay—and you're creating that good place right here, right now.

That's the second basis for success: your *persistence*. You just keep at it. Whatever is skillful, you try to nourish and encourage; whatever is unskillful coming up in the mind, you try to let it go.

The third quality is *intentness*: You give full attention to what you're doing. That's why the Buddha says to put aside greed and distress with reference to the world. Whatever is happening out in the world right now is no concern of yours because you've got business to do here inside—business that nobody else can do for you: trying to get the mind under control. So give this your full attention. That, of course, relates to the alertness.

And then use your *ingenuity*: When things are not going well, what could you do to change? The Pali term here, *vimamsā*, can also mean your powers of analysis—figuring things out.

If the mind doesn't settle down with the breath, is the problem with the breath or is the problem with the mind? If it's with the breath, try different ways of breathing, different ways of *conceiving* the breathing. Instead of thinking that you have to pull air in from outside, think of the breath, as I said, as energy originating in the body, and ask yourself, "Where does it feel good to think of the breath originating? Does it feel good to have it originate down in the navel? In the chest? Does that perception help you settle down with the breath? Does it make the breath more comfortable?"

Whatever perception helps you settle down, use that.

If the problem is with the mind, the Buddha has all kinds of ways of describing how you get the mind to drop unskillful thoughts. For example, sometimes simply noticing that the thought is unskillful, you just put it aside and come back to the breath. You don't have to analyze it. Just notice that it's off target, it's off topic, and bring the mind back.

Sometimes, though, that doesn't work. Here's where you have to drop the breath for a minute and think about that thought: "Where is this thought leading me? If I were to think this thought for 24 hours, where would it take me? Why am I thinking these things?"

All too often it's old stuff coming back again and again and again, things you've thought many times before. It's like watching an old movie—and if this *were* a movie, would you pay to see it? Well, no. Then why bother with it now?

Whatever way you can think of to decide, "Okay, this thought really isn't worth thinking about," and you put it aside.

Other times the thought's really insistent, in which case you have to say, "Okay, the thought can be there, but I'm not going to focus on it."

It's like being in a large room like this, and there are people over in another part of the room, talking. Well, you don't have to get involved with their conversation. You're right here with your breath. Don't pay those thoughts any mind because *attention* is one of the things that feed our thoughts. So, if you don't give them any attention, they'll come around like an animal that you used to feed, and you're not feeding it anymore: It'll be insistent, it'll make whining noises, but if you decide that you don't want this animal anymore, just let it go. After a while it'll stop coming around.

A fourth way of dealing with distractions is based on noticing that when a thought arises, there's going to be a slight pattern of tension in some part of the body. If you can see that, breathe through the pattern of tension. Think of it dissolving away, and the thought will have no place to stand.

And finally, if none of these methods work, just grit your teeth, press your tongue against the palette of the mouth, and make up your mind, "I will not think that thought!" Here's where it's good to have a meditation word to jam the circuits. A popular one in the forest tradition is *buddho*. It means *awake*. You just repeat that again, and again—buddho, buddho. Sometimes you have to repeat it really fast, so there's no sliver of a silence where the thought can come back in. This is the technique of last resort, and you can maintain it only for so long, but at least it can clear the air. Then you can get back to the breath.

So, when you have these four bases of success—the desire to do this, and the desire to focus on the causes; persistence in sticking with the causes; being intent on what you're doing, giving it your full attention; and then when things are not going well, analyzing it to see how you can change things—these are the qualities that give your ardency tools. In other words, your desire to do this well now has tools to get the results you want. Because, we *are* here for results. The path isn't something that happens on its own. And it's not a path of no desire. As

the Buddha said, “All your experiences are rooted in desire.” It’s simply a matter of learning which desires are skillful and which ones are not. If a desire is unskillful, it’s going to be a cause of suffering. If it’s skillful, it’s part of the path.

Our problem is that our unskillful desires have lots of tricks, and our skillful desires tend to be pretty clueless—they’re well-intentioned, but they don’t have the techniques to win out over the crafty ones. So as we meditate, we’re learning more techniques. We’re arming our skillful desires: the desire for happiness that harms no one; the desire for happiness that doesn’t get changed even by the aging or the illness or the death of the body.

When you think about it, the young prince who became the Buddha aimed high. He wasn’t the sort of person who’d say, “Well, I’ll just be happy doing whatever I feel like doing,” or, “I’ll just learn how to content myself with whatever is arising and be *okay* and try not to have any desires.” He had a very strong desire: “Is there something that doesn’t age, doesn’t grow ill, doesn’t die?” And he decided to devote his life to finding it, if there was such a thing—and he found it.

If he hadn’t had that desire, he wouldn’t have found it, so learn how to cultivate your skillful desires. Give them good tools, so that when something unskillful comes up in the mind, you have the tricks to deal with it, so that it doesn’t take over, and your skillful desires can be more in charge.

This is why we’re here with the breath. This is the path that goes there. This is the road that leads to the mountain, so give your full attention to the road—and learn all the skills you need to drive on it well.