Getting into the Present

May, 2003

Love all your thoughts of past or future to just drop away. Tell yourself that for the remaining hour, there’s nothing here that you have to think about aside from the present moment. Meditation does involve thinking. It’s not that you’re trying to blank yourself out. It involves a special kind of thinking, the thinking that focuses on the present moment, looks at what you have here, and makes the most of it. We all have a lot of resources right here, both in terms of the body and the mind. In terms of the body, there’s the breath. You can work with the breath energy in such a way that it feels really good just to breathe in and breathe out. It feels physically very satisfying. Working with the breath, you can find it to be mentally absorbing as well. In other words, take an interest in this energy field you have in the body. When you breathe in, exactly what is the process like? How does it feel? Try to be as sensitive as possible to the present, the absolute present, the direct sensation of the breathing in, the breathing out. In the beginning, you do have to think about it. But as you find it more interesting, more absorbing, you get to the point where you can drop any active thinking about the breathing process and just be right with it. But in the beginning, you have to think. Keep reminding yourself to stay with the breath if you find the mind is wandering off. If it’s wandering off a lot, you may want to add something more, like the word bhutto, which means awake. Bhutto means one breath, or the breath as long as bhutto. But when you find that you can stay with the sensation of the breathing, then you can drop the meditation word and just be with the sensation. That way it enables you to be more sensitive to how it feels as the breath comes in, as the breath goes out. If your thinking starts heading off into the past or future, remind yourself you’re heading to a precipice. In other words, the past is something you can’t change. The mistakes you made in the past, all the other issues that you have related to what you did or what was done to you in the past, there’s nothing you can do about it. As for the future, it’s uncertain, as the chant reminded us. Subject to aging, subject to illness, subject to death, subject to separation, all these things lie in the future. We haven’t gone beyond them. So thinking in the future, if it ignores these things, is delusionary thinking. So what does that leave? It leaves us with a present moment, which is the purpose of that fifth contemplation we chanted about just now. “I’m the owner of my actions, heir to my actions. Where is action happening? What’s happening right now in the present?” In fact, the action right now in the present is your intentions, the type of action that you can make a difference, or that you can make a difference in those actions. Things in the past you can’t change. As for things in the future, you don’t know what the situation is going to be. But right now you can try to choose to intend wisely, to act wisely. Even if it’s a simple matter of being careful about where you focus your attention, the precision, the sensitivity that you bring into the practice, this is where you can make a difference. So it only makes sense that we give this present moment as much attention as possible. Get to know it. Get to know it very well. Get familiar with it. We’re so unfamiliar with this thing that’s closest to us, the breath, coming in and going out right now. Yet if only we became more familiar with it, more friendly with it, we could find that it would have an awful lot to offer us. Sometimes we’re told to be in the present moment because it’s a wonderful moment. Well, many times there are a lot of unwonderful things happening here. But the good thing about the present moment is that you can shape it to some extent. There may be pain in the body. There may be problems from the situation outside you. But you can change the way you react to those things. You can be more skillful about those reactions. It’s not just a reactive state. The actions you do in the present moment really change your experience of the present. When someone talks about a person whose mind is narrow and selfish, and they meet up with something negative in the present moment, they can’t stand it. It becomes extremely oppressive. It’s like putting a huge salt crystal into a glass of water. Whereas if the mind is more expansive, with fewer limitations on it, it’s like putting a salt crystal into a river. The water is still potable. In other words, you’re not a passive victim of the present moment. You’re an active shaper of the present moment. Always keep that in mind, no matter what’s happening. The input you put into the present is going to determine, to a large matter, how you experience the present moment. But this input tends to be very subtle, which is why we have to focus a lot of attention on the present moment and learn to get more and more sensitive to what’s going on, starting with the breath. The breath is the physical object that’s closest to our awareness, closest to our intentions. Many times the movement of our intentions is hard to track, but the quality of the breathing is something you can track more easily. And it will be affected by the movements of the mind. So it’s important that you look in and get to know the present moment as much as possible. Because not only does life happen here, death happens here as well. Aging, illness, and death are all going to happen right here. So you want to get familiar with the territory. It’s like knowing that you’re going to be mugged someday, or someone’s going to try to mug you someday, on a particular street corner. Well, you go down to that street corner and you check it out to see where your escape routes are. When you really know the area, then you know the ways you can avoid getting into trouble. Because as the Buddha said, it’s here at the present moment that the mind can open to the deathless. There’s no place else that’s going to be able to open up. So you want to get to know this moment as well as you can. Spend a lot of time here. Because it more than repays the effort that it takes to get to be familiar with the present moment. And try to be on friendly terms. So many times when we focus on a meditation object, it becomes an adversarial relationship. The object seems to be unwilling to let us focus on it. Of course, the breath is perfectly willing. The breath doesn’t have any will at all. It’s just there. But if we take an adversarial relationship to it, it’s going to be difficult to know. Learn to be friendly with it. John Lee points out many times that if you get familiar with the breath, get on friendly terms with the breath, it’s going to start opening up for you, just like a person. The more the person finds that he or she can trust you, the more the person will start sharing secrets. The breath has secrets in the present here as well. These secrets open up to us only when we get on friendly terms. What does it mean to be friendly? Well, be sensitive. Don’t push the breath too much. Don’t squeeze the breath too much. Don’t force it to be long. Sometimes we have the preconceived notion that you have to have good long breathing for it to be good meditation. Well, that’s not necessarily the case. Sometimes your body needs shorter breathing. Sometimes you’re pushing or pulling it too hard, straining it one way or another, building up tension, as you breathe in, holding on to tension as you breathe out, or else trying to push it out too much. So try to get sensitive to it. Listen to it. Pay attention. Sometimes you’ll find that the body doesn’t need a particular steady rhythm of breathing, but each breath will have its own rhythm. Each breath will have its own range. This requires that you be on top of the breathing. Don’t let it get on to automatic pilot or become a mechanical process. The more sensitive you are to it, the more you find that your inner awareness of the body is willing to open up. Because if it’s been pushed and pulled so much, it tends to tense up, tighten up. You don’t want to get into the body because it’s an unpleasant place to be. But as you work with the breath, you find that you can make the body all the way down through the lungs, the stomach, the legs, the arms, the feet, the hands, the fingers, and the toes. There’s a sense of circulation, a sense of energy movement. If you’re sensitive to it, it will open up. And as it opens up, there’s a greater sense of unity in the body. This is what allows the meditation to move from simply being mindful of the breath to getting absorbed in the breath. It feels like your whole being is there, breathing in, breathing out. So this is how you use the breath as a tool, as a means to get into the present moment. Stay anchored there, and not just be tied down there, but feel really absorbed there. It’s a good place to stay. You want to stay here. It becomes your center of gravity. Once the present becomes your center of gravity, then you can look deeper into it. So you start seeing behind the scenes exactly what’s going on in the mind in relation to the breath. As you create this state of becoming here in the present moment, it’s easier to listen to the mind as it makes its commentary. The mental chatter about the breath and the object that you’re chattering about. In other words, the chatter itself and the topic of the chatter are all right here together. Because everything is present right here.

[https://www.dhammatalks.org/Archive/y2024/0305n2a2%20Getting%20into%20the%20Present.mp3](https://www.dhammatalks.org/Archive/y2024/0305n2a2 Getting into the Present.mp3)