

Discernment Purifies the Mind

September 15, 2006

Focus on with the breath. Be with the breath all the way in, all the way out. Let it be comfortable all the way in, all the way out. Notice whether long breathing feels good or short breathing feels good, or anywhere in between. Deep, shallow, heavy, light: Experiment with the breathing for a while to see what feels best. Stay on top of what feels best, because it may change.

This gives benefits both to the body and to the mind. When the breath feels good, the other functions or processes in the body are allowed to be more normal. That creates a good place for the mind to stay. If you're going to stay in the present moment, you have to try to make the present moment as comfortable as you can—and the breath is very quick and inexpensive way of doing that. You don't have to pay for your breath. It hasn't been privatized yet. So it's simply a matter of skill, learning to stay with a comfortable breath. It requires that you watch it for a while to gain a sense of what really is comfortable, what the potentials for the breath are. That takes time. And gaining a sense of what's just right for right now can take time as well. The advantage, though, is that over time you become more sensitive.

That shades into benefits for the mind. When the mind has a good place to stay, it becomes more sensitive, more alert. It's easier to stay mindful of the breath when the breath is comfortable, and as the breath gets more subtle, you become more alert to the subtleties of the breath. All this creates good qualities in the mind. That's what we're here for. We focus on the breath but we're here to catch the mind. So use the breath to catch the mind.

Ajaan Fuang's analogy is of trying to catch eels. If you just jump down into the mud to catch eels with your bare hands, they just slither off every which way. You have to find something that the eels like, one of the things they like is a dead dog. So you find a dead dog someplace and you stick it in a clay jar. Place it down into the mud, and eels will come into the jar without your having to do anything else. Then you just close off the mouth of the jar with your hands and you've got your eels. In the same way, the mind likes pleasure, so give it a pleasant place to stay by focusing on making the breath comfortable, and the mind will come of its own, without your having to force it.

We focus on the breath but we're here basically to catch the mind, because the mind is the big issue in life. As the Buddha said, we suffer not because of the body but because of the mind. Our eyes, the ears, nose, tongue, and body are on fire, but on fire with what? Greed, aversion and delusion. Those are qualities in the mind.

They may have an impact on the body. You'll notice when anger arises, your breath will change. When lust arises, your breath will change. Your experience of the body changes with these different mental qualities. But that's not the trouble. The trouble is what comes out of the mind. That's what we're here to focus on. That's what we're here to clean up.

When the Buddha asked us to be alert to the present moment and to be mindful, he wants us to keep in mind four things as we approach the present moment: that there's suffering, there's a cause to suffering, there's the possibility of putting an end to suffering by removing the cause, and then there's the path to that possibility, a path that actually actualizes it. These things should be kept in the back of your mind all the time. Even when you're focusing on the breath, you may run into periods when you say, "What are we doing here? Why are we with the breath?"

The answer should come: "We're here to develop concentration, and the breath is a good place to develop concentration. Because it's a part of the path, we develop it. We work on it." Then you pay attention to the breath and try to develop concentration around the breath. The reason the Buddha has us focus on these four things is because suffering is the big issue in life. It's the big problem in life. And as with any problem, you want to direct your attention precisely to where the issue is, where the causes are, and not let yourself get distracted by other things.

So when you're focusing on the present moment, you want to focus in any one of these four issues. Right now we're focusing on the path, and the duty with regard to the path is to develop it, to nourish it, to let it grow. The heart of the path is concentration, so you develop concentration around the breath.

So when the Buddha says to be alert, it's not just a matter of being aware of everything that comes into the range of your awareness. Focus your attention on the specific issues that really are related to getting the mind to settle down.

If there were no problems in life, you could be very choiceless in your awareness and just let your mind wander from here to there, note this and that without any particular need to focus on anything particular at all. But that's not the case. There are patterns in life. Suffering does come from craving. Craving comes from ignorance. These are the qualities of the mind. These are the things we're trying to abandon. There are the defilements: passion, aversion, and delusion. And as I said, they may leave their traces in the body, but the source of the problem is in the mind. So that's why we've got to focus on learning how to understand these things.

How do we clean these things out of the mind? Through discernment. Discernment gets developed by being concentrated and trying to be as sensitive as possible to the movements in the body, movements in the mind. The breath movements in the body are important because they reflect what's going on in the mind.

So you want to learn to watch: What's the mind doing? Where is it focusing? Right now you want to focus on the breath. As for anything that takes you away from the breath, you can regard it as unskillful, for the time being at least. If you see the mind going off in an unskillful direction, just drop it. You don't have to follow it through, in terms of getting involved in the story line and wanting to see it through to the end. Realize that those stories are all fabrications in the mind. You don't have to follow them through. Just drop them.

A friend of mind tells a story about a question you can ask people. Say, suppose you're in a dream. And in the dream, you're sitting in a boat, and all the members of your family are sitting there, too. There's also an evil person in the boat who's asking you to decide which person in the family should die. He's going to kill that person. If you refuse to make a choice, he's going to kill them all. So you've got to choose. Who are you going to choose? Your mother, your father, your children, what? And my friend said that when you ask that question of adults, they really get concerned and try to reason everything out. But if you ask children, they'll say, "Wait a minute. This is a dream. You just wake up." That's the end of the problem.

A lot of the distractions in our mind are just that: dream worlds. We don't have to be involved in them. So once a thought comes up in the mind, you're not committed to follow it through, to seeing it through, to see how it's going to turn out in the end. Just drop it midstream, in midsentence. Leave it hanging. And then come back to the breath.

This is good exercise in mindfulness and alertness. It's also the beginning of discernment. You begin to see how you get entangled in these things.

That's how the mind is purified, through discernment, through understanding. Sometimes we're told that mindfulness will purify you, or that working through the energy knots in your body will purify you, or non-reactivity will purify you or burn up all your karma. The Buddha never taught that. He said that the only thing that purifies the mind is discernment. And discernment lies in seeing why you do things and seeing through all the unskillful things you do, and learning how to understand them to the point where you don't want to do them anymore. That's what cleanses the mind. That's what purifies the mind.

So even though we work with the breath, we're working with it to the extent that the mind can settle down with it, and then it can really watch consistently. We use the breath as something to focus on, to develop our powers of sensitivity. But then we want to turn this sensitivity on the mind itself. That's where the real work lies.