

Right Here, Right Now

April 2001

If ever you want to gain knowledge in your meditation, you've got to focus on what's already right here. And it's hard to get more basic than just the body sitting here and the breath coming in, going out, along with the awareness of the body sitting here and the awareness of the breath.

You find that normally the mind has a lot of other awareness as well, but that kind of awareness tends to focus out on the past or out on the future or things outside you in the present. And the further you get away from the right here and the right now, the more uncertain things are. A lot of us have some very elaborate constructs about the past, elaborate constructs about the future, elaborate world-views about what's going on in the present moment. But when you stop and look, you realize what a small percentage of those constructs are really knowledge and how much of them are just guesswork.

You have a little fragment here, a little fragment there and it's like archaeologists coming across a site where only fragments remain and they're just trying to piece them together, filling in the big blank spaces in the middle. But what is that filler if not just ignorance dressed up as knowledge?

This is the way most of our knowledge is. We talk about ignorance as being an important thing we want to overcome in the meditation, but we don't really realize that the ignorance is not obvious not-knowing. It's the things we think we know, and yet when you dig down a little bit you realize that they're all based on guesswork.

The way to get around that is to just settle down and look: What's really right here? Is the breath coming in? You know it's coming in. Is the breath going out? You know it's going out. Okay, stay with that knowledge.

You may have read a lot of other things about what you've got to learn in the course of the meditation, but put that aside for the time being. Focus just on what's right here, right now. The more you get to know what's right here, right now, the more those other things will become plain.

This is not to say that book learning is totally useless. It's very useful in giving us pointers as to where to look, what questions to ask. But as for the answers: If they really are going to be answers, they have to come out of our experience right here, right now.

The books are also useful for checking up what we've learned. When you've gained insights into the present moment, exactly what state of mind were you in

when you gained those insights? Was it a stable state of mind? Was it a steady state of mind? Was it clear? Was it mindful? Was it alert?

There are many passages where the Buddha says that if someone actually puts the teaching into practice, develops the right level of alertness, the right level of mindfulness, and can clear away greed, anger, and delusion, there's no way that that person could *not* come to the Dhamma.

This is why, when he was teaching the basic principles of the Dhamma in the *Wings to Awakening*, there's very little expressed there in terms of views. Mostly it's qualities of mind—the assumption being that if you really do develop these qualities in your mind, you can't help but come to the same conclusions, see the same things the Buddha saw, gain the same sort of release he gained.

So it's not a matter of memorizing things you've picked up from the books, aside from the pointers that say, "Look here. Ask this question. Probe in there. Steady the mind here. And then see what happens."

All of it is right here, right now. In fact, when the Buddha talks about the insights that finally lead to awakening, they're all expressed in terms of "this" and "that": in other words, things that are immediately present.

Where was the Buddha on the night of his awakening? He was watching his breath. What's the difference between his breath and yours? Not much difference in terms of the breath, but a lot of difference in terms of the qualities of mind he brought to the breath, the questions he asked.

Those are the things we have to work on. Stay right here and develop mindfulness right here, develop alertness right here, concentration, discernment: all right here: right here in the heart; right here in the present moment. Because everything we're going to have to learn is right here. All the things we have to come to understand are right here.

The Buddha talked about *sankharas*, fabrications, as being the main focus of insight. It's when you understand fabrications, he says: That's the knowledge that's going to clear away all the bonds of the mind, all the fetters on the mind.

Now, what are those fabrications? There's the bodily fabrication, which is the breath. Verbal fabrication: directed thought and evaluation. When you focus your thoughts on the breath, you're evaluating the breath, okay, verbal fabrication is right there.

And then mental fabrications: feelings and perceptions. Perceptions are the labels you put on things. Feelings are the feelings of pleasure, pain, neither-pleasure-nor-pain that you feel both in body and in mind. Well, those are right here as well.

So what else do you need? You've got all the raw materials. It's just that the

mental qualities you need to bring to them are not up to speed yet. That's what you've got to work on. But it's all right here.

You may have trouble ferreting out, "Okay, which is the feeling, which is the directed thought?" Well don't worry about that for the time being. Focus on just getting steady, as steady as you can right here. The steadier you are right here, the more things will clear up.

It's like water that's been stirred up. If you keep stirring it up, it's just going to stay muddy. But if you allow it to sit still for a while, the mud particles will settle to the bottom and the water itself will become clear.

When the Buddha talks about developing insight, he says that it has to be developed together with tranquility. Tranquility is the process of stilling the mind. Insight comes from investigation, analyzing—in other words, the kinds of questions you ask, the way you probe into that stillness once it develops. Insight is not a particular set technique, because each of us has different places where we're caught up.

So there are general teachings: "Okay, probe here. Ask these questions." But there's no one particular technique for how you do that. That requires a certain amount of ingenuity. If it weren't for that, insight would just be a mechanical process. But once the mind is still, okay, you start asking questions.

There's no guarantee that the questions you ask tonight will give you awakening. But if you keep up the process, asking questions like, "Okay, where is the stress here right now? What goes along with the stress? What appears together with the stress? What disappears when the stress disappears?"—that set of questions will take you a long way.

Because you find that even in states of very stable concentration, once you've attained them, what seemed to be totally stress-free, totally relaxed, totally spacious still has a certain amount of burdensomeness to it. Still, someplace it's a burden on the mind.

So once you allow that state to develop, then you start looking: Okay, where is the stress here? Once you see it and once you see what goes along with the stress, then you drop whatever it is that goes along with the stress. See what happens then. This approach takes you through many layers of the mind.

The trick is knowing where to look. But again, it's all right here.

It's just like gravity. Gravity's been here along but it wasn't until Isaac Newton figured it out by asking the right questions that we could work with it. It wasn't that gravity didn't exist up until that time or that it was off someplace else. It was all around him right there in the present moment. But learning how to ask the right questions was what made the difference. That's how the understanding

came. Now people learn how to make use of gravity in ways that they would never have been able to before.

And it's the same with the insights of the mind. All the stuff you have to gain insight into: They're right here. It's just the problem of asking the right questions, looking in the right way. When you do, then these things that we have right here—some of which are blatant, some of which are not so blatant—will become a lot more useful, will serve a much better purpose than they ever did before.

So when you find your mind wandering off in terms of theory and history and other things out there, keep reminding yourself: Okay, is the real work here completed yet? Because this is where all the difference is going to be made. It's easy to talk about the theories, to compare them, and there's some use in that, but the prime issue is, okay, what are *you* doing right here right now? How much do you really know right here right now? How can you make use of that knowledge?

Those are the questions that'll get you someplace.