

Here to Learn

April, 2003

It's important that you try to develop the right attitude each time you come to the meditation. And what's that attitude? Basically it's the attitude that you're here to learn, so that whatever comes up in the meditation is an opportunity for knowledge. Of course, we want more than just to learn in a general way. We want to learn specific things: how to bring the mind to stillness, how to keep the mind mindful and alert.

But sometimes it goes faster than we want; sometimes it goes slower than we want. It doesn't fit in with our preconceived notions. The problem is often that instead of changing our notions as a result of what we learn, we simply judge what we like and don't like about what happens in the meditation. And that can create all kinds of problems.

We're here to learn about cause and effect: how they operate in the mind, how they operate here in the present moment. So, if you try an approach and it doesn't work, well, you've learned something. Of course, you may regard it as wasted time, but it's not really wasted. If you're observant, anything becomes a useful lesson as to what works, what doesn't work. When the mind is in a particular state, what kind of breathing is best for it? You can try to find out. Then if the approach you try doesn't work, tomorrow you can try another approach.

If you come with the attitude that you're here to learn, then every meditation can be a good meditation. Even if the mind doesn't settle down fully, even if it doesn't give you the sense of ease or rapture you're looking for, the meditation can be good in the sense that you've learned something.

So, try to cultivate that attitude each time you come here. There's bound to be desire in the practice, but learn how to focus your desire on the causes. Then focus your desire on learning how to observe what you do, how to observe the results of what you do. When you have this attitude, you find you can put up with just about anything.

You may be sitting here in pain. Well, observe the process of pain. If the mind isn't still enough to observe the pain, then tell yourself, "Well, ignore the pain for the time being. Focus on the breath." There'll be part of the mind that keeps saying, "You're harming yourself, you're harming yourself, allowing yourself to sit in pain like this." But one hour is not going to harm you. And often the pain is simply the pain of the blood being forced into capillaries where it's not usually forced. If you sit with it regularly enough, day after day after day, those capillaries begin to expand and they become new highways for the blood in your legs. In that case, the pain is simply part of the adjustment process.

So, if the level of your concentration isn't up to really looking into the pain, then you can allow the pain to be in the legs but you're going to be in another part of the body. You can focus on the breath energy in any part of the body: at the tip of the nose, in the chest, the top of

the head, the back of the neck, any part of the body that you can make comfortable by the rhythm of your breathing. Allow yourself to melt into that sensation of comfort. In other words, the observer is not something that's hard set against the breath. It's something that dives into the breathing, dives into the sensation and learns to enjoy it.

The sensation of not breathing out too much or not breathing in too much, or too little: You can experiment with that. At what point does the out-breath start becoming unpleasant? Stop at that point. You don't have to continue with the out-breath. Turn around and start breathing back in. The same with the in-breath: At what point does the in-breath start being uncomfortable? Stop there.

Play with the rhythm of the breathing. Explore the sensation. Find ways of using the breath to develop a sense of ease and well-being in at least one part of the body. Once you've got that part stable and comfortable, then you can start spreading your attention to other parts of the body, allowing that sense of comfortable breath to flood throughout the body along with your awareness.

When you've developed a sense of well-being like this with the breath, then you can turn and focus on the pain. Be careful to observe not only the physical aspects of the pain but also the mental chatter that gathers around the pain. What does the mind talk about as it's dealing with the pain? Oftentimes you find the most unbearable part of it is the sense, "Well, it's been painful for so long and I've got who-knows-how-much-more of the hour we're supposed to sit here." That's bearing the past and the future right here in the present moment, which of course is going to be unbearable.

So, when thoughts of how long you've been in pain here come up, just let them go. The past pain is past. It's gone. Future pain hasn't come yet. The only pain you've really got to deal with is the pain in the present moment. When you limit things just to the present moment, you find they're a lot more tolerable.

In fact, you often find that the physical pain is not the problem. It's the mental anguish, the mental upset that builds around the pain. And you have the choice to think those thoughts or not, as you like. When you realize that it's extraneous to the actual physical pain, it's not necessary and you have the choice not to think them, then why would you want to think those thoughts?

So we're here to learn. Over the course of time, we'll learn with greater and greater skill how to bring the mind to a sense of stillness, a sense of calm; how to direct our thoughts wherever we want them and drop any thinking that's not helpful. We do work on these skills. We're not simply sitting here watching willy-nilly whatever comes up.

But to develop those skills, you have to be patient, you have to be observant. And see the mistakes you make as part of your lessons, part of the knowledge you're trying to develop.

If you think of how you might want to focus on the breath and then try it out, if it works, well fine. File that away for future reference. If you focus in a particular way and find that it doesn't help at all, file that away for future reference as well.

As long as you're patient and really observant, and don't let the frustration of things not going the way you want them to get in the way, any meditation can become a good meditation—because it's an opportunity to learn, to find out something you didn't know before.

So, it's important that you not let impatience get in the way. If you watch carefully what's going on in the present moment, there's always something to learn. The reason we get bored in the present moment is because we're not looking carefully enough. Or we're looking for the wrong things and they're not showing up.

But if you look for your intentions—What are you intending right now? What are you doing right now?—that's a part of the present moment that very often is in the shadows, something we ordinarily miss. That's what you want to focus on uncovering. We're so busy looking at other things that we miss what we're doing. So be clear about *where* you're focusing, *how* you're focusing, *what* the results are. When things go well, learn how to keep them going well. When they're not going well, learn how to think of ways of adjusting the breath, ways of adjusting your focus. Try them out, see what happens. See what works; see what doesn't work.

If you learn how to approach the meditation as a learning experience, then you can take that attitude and apply it to other areas in life where things aren't going well. You can watch and see how your frustration about the situation around you actually creates more problems. The situation may be bad enough, but you can find ways of relating to it that cause you less suffering, simply by the way you think about it, by the way you focus on it. The burdens you carry from the past, the anticipated burdens you foresee in the future that you're going to start bearing right now, you can learn how to drop those and be totally in the present.

Because the present is something you *can* manage. If you try to manage the present together with the past and the future, it's too much, and you end up not seeing anything at all. If you want to see the present, you've got to drop the past, drop the future for the time being, and just look at what's happening. When you say something is intolerable: If you look at the present moment, what exactly in the present moment is intolerable? Sometimes you find that it's simply a particular sensation that you've associated with a certain thought. Well, if you drop the thought, drop the sensation, you're not burdening yourself unnecessarily. When you don't burden yourself unnecessarily, you find you have a lot more strength to deal effectively with whatever the situation is.

So, whatever the difficulty, whether it's inner or outer, as long as you realize that there are things that you can do to change your attitude, change the way you focus on things, change the way you think about things, then your explorations in finding new ways of thinking that are less stressful, less burdensome, become almost a game, an interesting challenge. You can see how

you change the perception of the situation in which you are and how that change in your perception changes the total experience, can make it manageable, can make it unmanageable. You have the choice.

When you realize you have that choice, then you open up to the fact that we have the freedom of choice all the time—simply that we turn our backs on it, ignore it, or sometimes can't even imagine it. But if you start exploring like this, you begin to realize how much choice you do have in the present moment. And how much of a difference it can make.