

Life Well Lived

November 23, 2004

Focus on your breath coming in, going out. It's the only thing you're responsible for right now: keeping your awareness right here. You can focus anywhere in or around the body: the tip of the nose, the base of the throat, the middle of the chest, around the abdomen. Any place where it's easy to notice that now the breath is coming in, now the breath is going out.

And allow the breathing to be easy. Don't struggle with the breath. Don't force it. You're not trying to put yourself into a trance. You're just trying to be very consistent in watching the breath. So you don't have to tense up around the breath. In fact, wherever you find any tension building up around the breath, allow it to relax. It's only when your attention is focused but relaxed that you can maintain it. If it's tense, it's going to wobble, it's going to jump off.

And try to bring your full attention to what you're doing. What you're doing is developing good qualities of the mind that you can use in other parts of your life—because ultimately you want to be able to bring the whole practice into your life. You want your thoughts, your words, and your deeds to be in line with your highest aspirations.

You have to ask yourself: "What do you really want out of life? What's your highest goal?" And then you have to look at the way you live. Is it in line with your highest goals or is it wandering off someplace else? Sometimes it wanders off because you don't have any clear idea about what your goals are. Other times you do have a clear idea but you're not attentive to what you're doing: your mindfulness slips, you forget your goals and go wandering off into the grass at the side of the road.

So the meditation is a good time to reflect on both of those issues. One, what do you really want out of life? Or you look at how other people have lived their lives, what they've made out of their lives: Who do you find the most inspiring? And two, are you living your life the way you'd really like to in the context of these questions?

This kind of reflection is why we have the Buddha image at the front of the room here: to remind us of one man who found an end to suffering and was able to teach it to other people. And to remember that this is the most valuable thing you can do in your life: Find out what you're doing that's causing suffering for yourself and for other people, realize that it's unnecessary, and learn how to stop.

That way, through your example, other people can notice that there is a way to put an end to suffering as well. Otherwise, people go through life thinking that suffering is necessary, that we've got to put up with it if we're going to get anything out of life.

Now, there *is* a certain amount of suffering involved in the path to the end of suffering. It's not comfortable sitting here cross-legged for hours on end. It's not easy to fight against your desires and periods of anger. But that kind of suffering is worthwhile because it leads to an end of suffering. Most suffering just goes nowhere, just gets you further and further

entangled. Look at all the endless suffering that people go through in life—all caused by their own lack of skill.

So you can shine a light *in* your life and *with* your life by following this practice.

The important thing about recollecting the Buddha is to remind yourself that he was a human being. He put an end to suffering not through any special godlike qualities but because he took human qualities and raised them to a high degree. All the good potentials, all the skillful potentials that we have in our own minds: He pursued them to see how far they could go. And he found that they can lead to a total happiness. That's one of the possibilities of human life.

At the very least, the example of his life makes you turn around and look at your own life. He says there's a way to put an end to suffering. Have you found it? Do you know how to do it? He gives instructions: virtue, concentration, discernment. Qualities we can develop in ourselves.

One of the hardest ones is concentration, because it's so easy for the mind to wander off. Catching the mind is like trying to catch a bead of mercury: You put a little pressure on it, it scoots off; put a little pressure on this side, it scoots someplace else, scatters all over the place. But unlike mercury, the mind *can* be tamed. It just takes time and dedication.

Normally, the mind spends its days wandering around thinking about this, thinking about that, running all kinds of movies through your head. One of the tricks in training the mind is learning how to put an end to the movies, at least not get deluded by them.

Think of yourself going into a movie house. You look up at the screen and there seem to be people up there, broad vistas, all kinds of actions. Things to make you laugh, things to make you cry. But if you go look very carefully what do you see? It's just flashes of light on a screen, that's all it is. And yet it can force you through a whole gamut of emotions. You ask yourself when you leave, "Okay, what did you get out of it?"

I've seen movies that have sparked riots, they got people so upset. Or movies that incited violence. And this is the way it is with a lot of the movies that go through people's heads. All the unskillful things we do in life come from these movies in our heads.

So we've got to learn how to examine them. One, try to make more skillful movies. Movies that don't lead to violence or don't lead to strong passion, uncontrolled emotions. Instead, think movies about the Buddha's life. Think movies about the Dhamma, the teaching he gave. Think movies about all the people who've followed his teachings in the past, gained awakening themselves. That's one kind of reflection..

This is why we have these chants every evening on the Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Sangha: to remind us to take the movies in our minds and turn them in this direction. Because where do these movies lead? They lead to stillness, they lead the mind coming into the present moment.

And then, once these movies have delivered you to the present moment, try to make your awareness as bright as possible, as clear as possible with the breath. When you're clearly aware of the whole body breathing in, the whole body breathing out, it's like taking the lamp of the movie projector and turning it up so that it's really bright, so bright that it

obliterates all the colors of the film. So that it all comes out as a pure bright white light.

In other words, try to be so fully aware of the body in the present moment that there's no room for the movies to show. You shine right through them. For this reason, when the sensation of breathing gets comfortable enough, start thinking of the comfortable sensation going out and filling your whole body, so that the whole body feels easy as you breathe in, feels easy as you breathe out.

You can trace the energy flow in your body. Notice where it's blocked, and if you find pieces of the body are missing, locate what you've got on either side: Where's the gap? Say the gap is in your thigh: Well, locate your hip and locate your knee and work in from both directions. Where do they connect? If they were totally blocked off you'd have no feeling at all in your whole leg. But here it's just a gap.

So explore the gaps and reconnect things in the body. The way they reconnect may not be in a straight line, but whatever line you detect, you can gradually straighten it out, and make your inner sense of the body conform more to the way the parts are actually arranged.

As you do this, your awareness begins to spread more and more easily and willingly into the body. Or the awareness that's already there gets brighter and brighter, until it's so bright – and here where not talking the brightness of a light – but it's so clear and present that any movie that might come into your mind just gets obliterated by the brightness, by the broad range of your awareness.

Once you're able to maintain this state, there's another way of dealing with the movies. That's to turn down the bright light a little bit and to allow movies back into the mind, but watching them from a different perspective. In other words, not looking at them to get involved in the stories but just to see the fact: Here comes this pattern to the mind. Why does the mind go for it?

And see if there's also an echoing pattern in the body. Because sometimes when a thought goes through the mind, there's a pattern of tension in the body. If you breathe through that tension, the thought goes away.

But in particular, notice to see how the movie pulls you in. These little plays that get put on in the mind: What is it that makes them so absorbing? You notice, if you're flying on an airplane and you catch sight of a movie in somebody else's seat, it doesn't take too long for you to get pulled in. Why is that? Because the mind functions in the same way. These images float up in the mind and before too long they turn into a story. Then you feel compelled to follow the story and see where it goes. Sometimes it goes useful places, but a lot of times, though, it doesn't. It's just random spinning.

But to be really in control of the situation so you don't get pulled into things you don't want to be pulled into, you've got to learn how to take apart every movie: good movies as well as bad movies, useful ones as well as useless ones.

See how the mind deceives itself. Those little flickering images in the brain suddenly become real issues, things that are worth getting upset about, worth getting happy about, sad about, whatever. As you watch this from a bit of a distance, you begin to see how the

mind reads meaning into these flickering things. And how it's totally arbitrary. You find that you're less and less under their power.

It's like learning about all the tricks they use in advertising: the hidden skulls in the ice in the glass of whisky, or the hidden images of bodies in the pictures of automobiles that pull you in. When you learn to look for them, you find that you're less and less fooled by them.

You begin to realize that this is the same way the mind acts. It makes images to fool itself because it wants to be fooled. Try to figure out why. Otherwise, when it's fooled by its images, when it gets drawn in by them, it can end up doing all kinds of things that you don't really want to do.

So step back and look at what you want to do with your life, and then turn around and look at what you're actually doing with your life. You realize a lot of the discrepancy between the two comes from the fact that you're letting yourself get fooled by these images.

So this is a lot of how we train the mind. We give it the breath as a place to settle in, so that, as a first line of defense, it can blot out any movie that it wants to blot out. In other words, sometimes you're trying to analyze the movie, to understand why you're fooled by a particular pattern of thought, and you begin to realize you're getting sucked in. Part of you *wants* to get sucked in. So you just turn up the light to blot out the movie. Give the mind a chance to rest, regain its strength.

Then you can turn back to look at the movies again., until you can see through the way the mind deceives itself, the way it deludes itself. In that way, you're in control. Once you're in control, it's a lot easier to live life the way you want it to be lived, to do with your life what you really want to do with it.

This is why the training of the mind is so important, because when the mind is trained it becomes your ally. You're in control. When it's not trained, you don't know what it's going to do. It's like having your biggest enemy living in your house. Or like giving your car over to a crazy person: You have no idea where the crazy person is going to drive you off a cliff just because he gets some crazy notion in his head. The mind out of control is just like that.

The mind under control, though, does what you want it to. When you decide you want a certain thing in life, it acts so as to attain that thing. It doesn't start acting at cross-purposes, it doesn't forget its real values, doesn't forget its real aspirations. This way, the life you live becomes the life you want to live. When your life is done, you can look back on it and see that it was well-lived.

But how's a life lived? It's lived moment to moment. It's lived here in the present moment, making choices in the present moment. This is why we take the breath as the basis of our training. Because it keeps us anchored in the present moment where all important decisions are made. When we treat the breath with mindfulness, alertness, and concentration, it keeps the present moment connected to all the good qualities in the mind. It keeps the present moment connected to our aspirations for what we want out of life as a whole.

It all comes together right here.