

Stay with the Breath

April 8, 2005

Try to stay focused on one thing for the rest of the hour. You don't even have to focus on the Dhamma talk. If there's anything relevant to what you're doing, it'll come right into your awareness and you'll notice it. You'll hear it. If it's not relevant to what you're doing, it's a distraction. So let it go. It may be useful for somebody else, or for the person giving the talk, but you don't have to focus your attention outside. Just keep it on the sensation of the breath.

When you breathe in, know you're breathing in; when you breathe out, know you're breathing out. Notice where in the body you have the sensations that tell you, "Now you're breathing in; now you're breathing out." Notice how the sensations feel. Do they stay comfortable all the way through the in-breath, all the way through the out-? If there's some stress and strain at the end of the in-breath or the end of the out-breath, it's a sign that the breath is too long. Allow it to be little bit shorter. Or if the in-breath doesn't feel satisfying, you might want to try a little bit longer. See how the rhythm of the breath affects your sense of the body.

And see how your conception of the breath affects your sensation of the body. If you feel that you have to pull the breath in, you really have to fight to pull it in, that's really unnecessary—because the breath is going to come in and go out on its own without your having to fight. In fact, it's much better for the body if you *don't* fight. What's happening is that you're trying to force it in a way that it doesn't naturally go.

So just tell yourself: Whichever direction the breath is going to come in and out of the body, wherever it's going to come in and out of the body, let it do its own thing. Your only duty is to keep track of the sensations and to allow those sensations to be comfortable. Because the more comfortable they are, the easier it is to stay with the breath.

What you're trying to do here is to get the mind to settle down in the present moment with a sense of ease, with a sense of belonging. For several reasons. One is that it's simply good for the mind to have a sense of belonging right here. If you don't belong in the present moment, you're always going to be running around in the past, running around to the future. And a mind that can't settle down is a mind that's going to wear itself out.

So it's healing for the mind simply to be able to stay here with this comfortable sensation of the breathing. Whatever thoughts come to the mind, you don't have to pay them any attention. Your only duty is to stay right here and allow this

process of being with the sensation of comfortable breathing to heal both the body and the mind.

The other reason we do this is because only when the mind is in the present moment can it see what it's doing. We spend most of our day getting into our thoughts, but we very rarely look at the process of how a thought forms. Yet the only way you can get around unskillful thinking, any kind of thinking that creates suffering, is to look at the process, to see how jerry-rigged the whole thing is, how arbitrary it is: all the make-believe that the mind engages in, all the messages it sends back and forth that say, "Make-believe this is this, and that's that," and all of a sudden, you've got a thought of some other place.

It's like a person with a control key on a computer keyboard. When you press the control key, all of a sudden the letters on the alphabet mean something else. S isn't just an S anymore; it's a "Save." C isn't a C, it's a "Copy," because you've got the control key pressed. It's the same with the mind. What would be ordinarily a sensation of the body, a sensation of the breath, suddenly becomes a thought of some other place, some other time, some other people.

Those kinds of thoughts can wreak all kinds of havoc in the mind. Once you move into them, it's like moving into another world and only then finding out whether it's a good world to inhabit or not. And a lot of times it's too late once you're there. You're in there, you're stuck, and it can get very entangling.

You untangle yourself from the worlds of the mind by watching the process by which those worlds are created. When you see the process, you tend to give those thoughts a lot less credence. You can use them simply when they're useful and drop them when they're not. After all, if something is going to be useless or actually harmful, why create it? The reason we create it is because we don't realize we're creating it. It seems to just happen, to pop up in the mind of its own accord, because the process of creation is an underground process. It's out of sight and therefore out of our awareness.

What we're doing as we meditate is bringing the mind into the present moment to put it in a position where it can see the processes of thought creation, to bring them up into the light of day.

So even though it may seem simple, this process of just staying with the breath, staying with the breath, coming back to the breath when the mind wanders off, trying to be as sensitive as possible to the whole breath in and the whole breath out, without there being any gaps: It's a simple process but it's an important one. It's a really basic skill for the survival of the well-being of the mind.

So don't think of this hour as a long time. It's actually very short. Try to make use of the whole hour to heal the mind, to do just this one thing: to stay with the breath as if your life depended on it—because it does.