

Around in Circles

May 28, 2005

For the next hour, stake out your territory: the breath in the body. You don't want the mind to wander away, outside of this territory. It's not very big, just a couple of feet long, a few feet wide, about a foot thick. That's the size of the body. And what does the breath do? It comes in and goes out. That's what you've got to explore.

You would think that in a few minutes you could explore the whole thing. But people can spend their whole lives learning new things about their breath. So don't sit and wonder, "When we do we get to move on to the next thing?" Everything you're going to need to know is right here. It's simply a matter of learning to become more familiar with it.

How many different kinds of breath are there? There are lots of different kinds. There's long, there's short, there's heavy, there's light. Narrow, broad. There's the in-and-out breath, there's the sense of breath energy that flows through the body, some of which moves, some of which is still, but there's also a sense of energy there throughout the body. Sometimes the movement feels blocked, sometimes it flows. And you've got a whole hour to explore it.

As Ajaan Lee once said, it may seem like we're just going over the same old territory over and over again. But, he added what's wrong with that? It's like going along a path. The more you go back and forth along the path, the smoother the path gets. The weeds die. You get to know what's on either side of the path, what plants are growing there, which plants are poisonous, which plants are edible, which plants are medicine. And the advantage of a smooth path is that if there's any danger, you can run away fast.

This is why they say that by going around in circles here in the body, you're actually moving forward. Each time you go around, you get to see something you didn't see before. Most of the time, you don't see anything because you're not paying careful attention. But that's the whole point. You're trying to develop your powers of attention, your powers of awareness. Instead of simply trying to stuff in a lot of information, which is the way we tend to approach education, we're trying to get familiar with this territory through our direct awareness.

The first thing is to learn how to make it a comfortable place to stay. In the course of making it comfortable, you learn a lot of interesting things not only about the breath, but also about the mind. That's where meditation has its real payoff. Helping your sense of the body in the present moment is important too,

but ultimately you've learned a lot more about what it means to be attentive, what role of perception plays, what role your thought constructs play, the questions you ask. All of these things you learn just by going over the same old territory over and over and over again.

After all, the Buddha was meditating on his breath when he gained awakening. What's the difference between his breath and your breath? Not that much. But there *is* a difference in the quality of awareness he brought to it. So how do you develop that awareness? Just by sticking with the breath, experimenting with the breath, seeing what kind of rhythm of breathing feels good, what texture of breathing feels good right now, what the body needs right now. Do you know? Look into it. Try different ways of breathing and see what feels right.

And learn how to experiment. What kind of experimenting gets results? If you push the breath too hard or too much, it gets very unnatural. But if you don't do anything with the breath at all, you don't really learn much. You don't get a sense of the real potential of what the breath can do for you. The breath can be an object that you get fully absorbed in and it gives a great sense of rapture and ease. It allows the mind to settle down to the point where not only does the mind settle down and grow still, but the breath also ultimately settles down and grows still, too. That can happen.

But the only way you can learn how to do that is by exploring the breath here in the present moment, going over the same old territory, over and over and over again, learning how to make it interesting, finding out what are the times you have to be more proactive in the meditation, what are the times you simply watch. These are lessons you have to learn for yourself. Right effort isn't always a matter of pushing and pushing and pushing. There *are* times when you have to push, but other times you simply have to watch. You have to figure out by watching the breath, by watching the state of the mind, what's appropriate for any particular time.

This is what it means to be familiar. Some people throw themselves into the meditation and really push, push, push, run into a brick wall, and then they give up. When they give up, they feel more at ease. Then they think that that's the path: relaxing in the present moment. But just learning how not to do something stupid doesn't mean you've actually learned how to do anything intelligent. The Buddha has an image of a man trying to get milk out of a cow. He twists the cow's horn, twists the cow's horn, but nothing comes out. It's only when you pull on the udder that the milk comes out.

If you've been twisting the cow's horn but then give up, you may feel a lot better, but still you don't get the milk. You've got to figure out: What is right

effort for you right now? That requires that you practice again and again and again, so that you get a more and more intuitive sense of what's right for a particular situation.

Which is one of the reasons why we have to limit the parameters: just the mind staying alert to the breath right here. There are not too many variables, it would seem. But it's plenty enough to keep you busy, plenty enough to give you all the raw material you need to learn about the mind in the present moment. Because that's when the mind does all its work: in the present moment.

We often lose sight of that. The mind paints a picture in the present moment, and all of a sudden we get into that picture and we feel like we're in the past or in the future someplace else. But it's just the mind painting pictures here, right here right now. If you don't want to get deluded by the pictures, you have to watch the picture-painting process. And again, that happens right here.

So all the things you need to know are happening right here. To know them, you have to stay right here to watch them.

Don't worry about going around and around in circles, because it gives you a second and third and fourth and a hundredth and a thousandth chance to see what's actually happening right here. If you missed the first time around, well, come back and watch it again. Ultimately, you learn to be more perceptive, to pick up on the subtleties.

This is your territory for the rest of the hour. Try to get familiar with it, and in the process of getting familiar with it, you learn a lot of unexpected things. You can learn a lot of unexpected things if you pay attention.