

## *Good Work*

*November 2, 2005*

The present moment is not automatically a wonderful moment. You have to make it that way.

This is a lesson we often don't want to hear. We come to meditation hoping just to have a chance to rest, to put down our burdens and not be expected to try to accomplish anything or have to do anything. The world is full of the push to accomplish, the push to do, so we'd like to get away from that pressure.

Sometimes we think, "Wouldn't it be nice if we could find a place where we're just told that there's really nothing to accomplish. All you have to do is just sit here, and everything's going to be perfectly fine." We may want to hear that, but that's not necessarily the best thing for us to hear.

Fortunately, you can find rest, you can find ease in the present moment. But it requires a skill, and that's one of those skills we're working on. On the physical side, it means learning how to breathe in a way that feels good for the body. The mental side is a lot more difficult, but having that task of focusing on the breath is one way to anchor the mind in the present moment and to give yourself a standard.

As long as you're with the breath, you're in the present. If you're not with the breath, there's the possibility you could be away some place in the past or the future. But the breath is right here, right now. For sure. Then if you notice anything pulling you away from the breath, you know you've got a problem—something to deal with, something to let go of.

So while you're sitting here and meditating, any thought that pulls you away from the breath, you have every right to let go of. No matter what the responsibilities might be—having to mull over things you regret doing or saying today, or worrying about things you're going to have to do or say tonight or tomorrow when you leave here—those don't have any claim on your attention right now. They can't demand their right to be heard right now. Because you've got your rights, too—your right to allow the mind just to put those things aside for the time being. Put them down. Let them go.

If they say you're irresponsible, you can say, "Let's be irresponsible for an hour." But that's really not the case. You've got a different set of responsibilities right here, which is to give the mind a good place so it can rest and gain a sense of healing, gain a sense of respite, so it can recover from its self-inflicted wounds and

the wounds inflicted from outside. All it has to do is be with the breath, and get on good terms with the breath.

This is one of the secrets of making the present moment a really nice moment—realizing that as long as you’ve got this body here, it has all kinds of potentials. There could be a potential for great pain, or a potential for great pleasure. Fortunately, the pleasure here doesn’t require all that much, just that you pay careful attention to the breathing. Adjust it slightly here, and then think about it. Contemplate it. What would longer breathing feel like? Does that feel good? If it does, stick with it. If it doesn’t, you can change. You don’t have to commit yourself to any kind of breathing that you don’t want to.

In other words, you want to learn how to make use of the potentials you’ve got here and to use them in a skillful way. You can breathe in a way that can create headaches and stomachaches and create all kinds of problems in the body—and many of us do because we’re not paying attention. But now you have time to pay attention and to settle in with whatever breathing catches your fancy, whatever feels good right now.

That’s not the end of the path, but it’s part of the path: learning how to find a sense of ease in the present moment and getting more and more confident that this is your center of gravity. All too often, our thoughts are focused way out ahead in the future. When your center of gravity is away from where you are right now, that causes problems. You’re leaning, leaning, leaning ahead. That’s a difficult posture to maintain without a lot of stress and strain. But when your center of gravity is right here in the present moment, it’s a lot easier to maintain with a better sense of balance. And you need that balance because there’s some very delicate work that needs to be done here in the present moment.

It’s interesting that one of the passages of the Pali Canon where the Buddha places the greatest emphasis on being in the present and not chasing after the past or worrying about the future is one where he talks about what you have to *do* right now. You can’t just sit here and “be.” There’s work to be done, and you can’t put it off to tomorrow because you might die before tomorrow comes. The “doing” here refers to the fact that there are potentials for all kinds of suffering here in the present moment, and the mind has lots of potentials for causing that suffering—bringing it up and creating it out of those potentials. It doesn’t have to, and yet it keeps doing this.

Greed, anger, and delusion, craving in its various forms: These are all here, operating in the present moment. They can pull you to the past, they can pull you to the future, but they come out of the present. It’s not that when you get to the

present all your problems disappear. It's that you're actually getting to the place where they come from, and there's work to be done right here.

When thoughts arise, they arise right here. When they disband, they disband right here. When craving, greed, anger, and delusion get into the act, they do it right here. This is why we want to be right here, to pay attention right here, so that we can watch these things as they happen, and catch them in the act before they create big problems.

So we're resting the mind in concentration not because that's where we're going to end up, but because we need rest in order to do the work. It's like people coming to stay here at the monastery. I often find that they arrive with a huge sleep debt, and they need a couple of days to work it off. It's the same when you come to the meditation. Often you have a stress debt. So the meditation begins simply with the quest to find a place where the mind can rest and disentangle that stress debt and let it dissolve away. Then you can get down to work, seeing where the mind fools itself into going along with mind states that are really detrimental to it, fooling itself into actually liking them.

The mind does a big propaganda job on itself. The insights of the great propagandists and advertisers doesn't come out of thin air. They come from watching how the mind works, how it can dress up an idea and make it look like it's something you really want to go with, or that you *have* to go with when you really don't, when it's actually detrimental to you and it's totally unnecessary.

This is what discernment is: catching the mind in the act of doing those things and falling for those things—at the same time seeing the possibility that you don't have to fall. When your alertness and mindfulness are quick enough, you can see this and stop the process. You keep digging in and digging in to see: "Why does the mind keep doing this? What are its underlying assumptions? What does it think it's going to get out of these things? Why does it have faith in these things?"

This is what it comes down to. Faith is one of those words we don't talk about much in Buddhist circles. It's almost the F-word of modern Buddhism. Many people come to the Buddhist teachings simply to get away from any mention of faith, and so their faith goes underground. They actually put their faith in all kinds of strange things without realizing what they're doing, without calling it faith. But that's what it is.

A lot of the meditation comes down to seeing what really is worthy of faith. Many of our ideas that we've carried around for so long that they seem to be embedded permanently in the mind—a permanent fixture in the mind: They really aren't. They're ideas we picked up; they've just gotten repeated, repeated and repeated. Like the Big Lie. And we believe these things, thinking that we have to

think in ways that can damage the mind. Or we have old patterns of behavior that we think we've just got to keep following again and again and again, because we think that's who we are.

The question to ask yourself is: Why do you believe these things? If you could look at them carefully and begin to question them, you'd begin to see that they're not worthy of belief. That's what the teachings on inconstancy, stress, and not self are all about—learning how to question these things with which you really identify. You come to see that you don't have to believe them. You don't have to put your faith in them. You can put more faith in your mindfulness and your alertness, more faith in the discernment you can develop here in the present moment.

As you begin to see the results of the meditation, both in allowing the mind to find a sense of ease in the present moment and in beginning to pry yourself loose from these assumptions, that's when you start seeing your faith confirmed: that training the mind this way really does relieve a lot of suffering. Your absolute confirmation doesn't come until you really see that this path leads to a deathless happiness. But you get encouragement along the way by seeing the interim results. It works. Your mind is at least in better shape than it was before. It may not be absolutely there at the deathless yet, but at least it's in better and better shape, and you're depending on something that doesn't have require you to focus outside. It's right in here—in this skill you're working on.

So remember, we're here in the present moment, but the present moment keeps moving. You want to keep your mindfulness and alertness quick so they can keep moving as well, as the present moves through time. And you gain knowledge and experience as you move. When it gets really fine, though, is when you see that there's something here that's been behind the present moment that you've been ignoring all along. It's right here. That's why you have to keep looking in the present moment: to see what's even closer than the present.

But to develop the subtlety that you need to see it takes time. It takes effort. And it's learning how to balance the need for rest—the need for a sense of ease in the present moment—and the need for the effort to keep digging and being more and more observant: That's where a lot of the skill lies.

So it's work to stay in the present, and it's work to dig out the roots of why the mind causes suffering. But it's good work. It's the kind of work that when you do it right, instead of wearing you out, it gives you more and more strength.