

Solid Inside

November 15, 2005

When my father first went to Thailand to visit me, part of the trip was to learn meditation. The first question he asked my teacher before they started meditating was, “You know I’m a Christian. Is that going to be any barrier to the meditation?” My teacher Ajaan Fuang said, “No. In meditation, we focus on the breath. The breath isn’t Buddhist, it isn’t Christian, it’s common property all over the world. In focusing on the breath, we get to know our own minds. Then we can talk about our own minds. We don’t have to bring in the terms Buddhist or Christian.”

The first step in the meditation is simply that: to bring your mind to the breath and keep it there. The qualities you develop—mindfulness, alertness, concentration—are qualities that are useful whatever your path.

So focus on the breath. Know when it’s coming in, know when it’s going out. Allow yourself to breathe comfortably. Don’t force the breath too much. Whatever the body seems to need—whether it seems to need long breathing or short breathing, fast or slow, heavy or light, deep or shallow—let it breathe in whatever way it feels good.

An important principle in bringing the mind into the present moment is that you want the present moment to be a pleasant place to be. If it’s not, you’re going to go wandering off someplace else. It’s like a child. If the parents are beating the child all the time, even if they lock the windows and doors, the child is sure to find some way to escape out of the house. But if the parents are kind, give the child good things to play with, give it warmth and understanding, then they can leave the doors and windows wide open, and the child won’t go wandering away.

And it’s the same with the mind. If you want to be alert to the present moment, you have to make the present moment as comfortable as you can. After all, it’s from the present moment that we act. The things we do, the things we say, the things we think, come out of the way we relate to the present moment. If the breath is comfortable, it gives you a sense of good foundation here, so that what you do and say and think isn’t coming out of desperation, out of fear, or out of hunger. It’s coming out of a sense of ease and solidity right here, right now.

If you find the mind wandering off, just bring it back. It wanders off again, bring it back again. Don’t get discouraged. Don’t get frustrated. Don’t get angry with yourself. You have to bring an attitude of goodwill to the practice. As we chanted just now: “May I be happy. May all living beings be happy.” And one very

immediate way of expressing goodwill for yourself is to breathe comfortably. After all, you're breathing all the time, and there's no need to breathe in an uncomfortable way. So here's a very immediate, very accessible, totally inexpensive way to bring a sense of comfort and ease to the mind, by paying careful attention to how you breathe.

In doing this, you're expressing goodwill not only for yourself but also for other people, because as I said, when you act and speak, it comes out of your feelings in the present moment. If you can develop a feeling of ease, a feeling of well-being right here, then your actions are bound to be kinder. You're not acting on irritation, you're acting from a sense of ease and well-being. You're not acting out of hunger, you're acting out of a sense of fullness. That way, what you do and say and think is coming from a better source.

That quality of goodwill actually expresses itself in four attitudes. There's not only goodwill but also compassion. You see other people who are suffering, you want to help. Or you can start with compassion inside. Wherever inside the mind is causing itself to suffer, you realize you don't really have to make yourself suffer, you know. It's all unnecessary. It's simply because you're not observant, you're not watching the mind carefully enough to see where it's picking up a thought that's unnecessary.

One way of developing this attitude of compassion is to look at the breath. Where in the body does the breathing feel uncomfortable? Think of the breath not just as air coming in and out of the lungs, but more as the process of breathing, and your whole body is involved in that: all the nerves, all the muscles, the flow of the blood throughout the body. The longer you sit here and watch the body in the present moment, the more you pick up on these things.

One way to make the breath comfortable is to start at your fingers. Start relaxing your fingers, and then relaxing your hands, relaxing your wrists, your arms, your elbows, the upper part of the arm. Then start with the toes, come up the feet, up the legs, up the back, through the skull. You'll notice, as you relax the different muscles, that it's going to have an effect on the way you breathe. Put an emphasis on the parts of the body that feel good. If you go jumping right into the pain, sometimes you bring in an unskillful attitude to curing the pain, and that's going to tie things up even more.

So notice where the comfortable areas are in the body, and focus there. Allow them to grow more comfortable. That's the internal equivalent to sympathetic joy. You see something is comfortable in the body, you allow it to stay that way, you encourage it to stay that way and to improve. Then think of that sense of ease and comfort spreading to other parts of the body.

Then there's the attitude of equanimity. You'll find that there are some things in the body that you can't change, no matter how skillfully you look at the present moment. No matter how skillfully you work with the breath, there are certain patterns of tension that may take a while to work through. So you simply let them be for the time being, so that you can focus your attention on the areas where you really can make a difference.

This is the same principle that applies outside. You see people are suffering, and you want to help. You see people are happy already, and you don't begrudge them their happiness. You don't resent their happiness. But then there are cases where there are people you would like to help but can't, for one reason or other, or when there are people who are happy who don't seem to deserve it. You shouldn't get involved in issues like that. That's their business. Focus your attention on your business, the areas where you can make a difference. When the Buddha teaches equanimity, it's not so that people will be narrow-minded or cold-hearted. It's simply a question of priorities. Don't waste your energy on things that you can't change for the better. Focus on the areas where you can.

When you learn how to bring these attitudes to your breath, then it's a lot easier to bring them to other people as well, because it's the same mind that's carrying those attitudes around. The more solidly you can establish these attitudes toward yourself, the easier it is to establish them toward other people.

There's the parable of the acrobat. The acrobat gets up on top of the pole, and as his assistant gets up on his shoulders, he tells her, "Now, you watch out for me, and I'll watch out for you, and that way we'll both stay safe, perform our tricks, come down, and get a reward." And his assistant says, "No, that's not going to do at all. I have to maintain my sense of balance. You maintain your sense of balance. And that way we protect each other. We'll be safe, we won't fall down. We can perform our tricks, come down from the pole, and get our reward.

In that case, it was the assistant who was right. You've got to watch out for your own sense of balance. But in doing so, you're also protecting other people. You're not inflicting them with your own imbalance. In other words, when you don't give expression to greed, anger, and delusion, you yourself benefit, the people around you benefit.

It all begins with how you relate to yourself inside. Start with something simple like the breath here. It's where the mind and the body relate. If you learn to develop a sense of mindfulness and alertness here, a sense of solidity inside that's not knocked over by sights or sounds or smells or tastes or tactile sensations or ideas about this that or the other thing, then once you can be solid inside, it's a lot easier to be solid when you're around other people. You can learn how to rely on

yourself more, and other people can learn how to rely on you, too. It's one of those rare areas of the world where everybody benefits.

So make good use of this hour to get to know your own breathing. Notice how the mind relates to the breath. Try to keep both the mind and the breath on good terms, and that can provide a foundation for all the other good you want to do in life.