

Appropriate Attention

April 29, 2006

Focus on your breathing. It's a simple exercise: Just be with the sensation of the breath all the way in, all the way out. Notice where you have a sense of the breath, which parts of the body have the energy movement or the physical movement that let you know that now the breath is coming in, now the breath is going out. And it may be in unexpected places. Just try to be sensitive to what you've got right here, right now. If the mind wanders off, bring it back. Wanders off again, bring it back again. It's a simple exercise but it's not easy. It takes concentration, it takes mindfulness, it takes alertness, all of which are qualities we have to develop.

Everybody goes through the process of finding that you focus on the breath and then all of a sudden you're someplace else—as if someone had come up with a big sack and put it over your head, dragged you off, and then dumped you out of the sack someplace else. You wonder how you got there. Well, you have to find your way back to the breath and fortunately it's right here. You don't have to retrace all the steps. Just come right back to the breath. And then you find yourself getting kidnapped again. It's important that you not let yourself get discouraged. Realize that this is the stage that everybody has to go through.

Sometimes you hear people complain that "I can't meditate because my mind is too distracted." It's like saying, "I can't go to the doctor because I'm too sick." No matter how sick you are, you've got to go to the doctor, because that's how you overcome your sickness. And the same way with the distraction. You overcome distraction by meditating: noticing it every time it happens and bringing the mind back. Try to be quicker the next time in noticing when you're distracted. See if you can sense the warning signals, the hints in the mind that let you know that the mind is about to go someplace else. Try to be very, very alert. The powers of mindfulness and alertness are things that will develop over time.

It's like going down to the gym. You can't expect to lift the heaviest weights right from the very beginning or to do the most strenuous exercises. You gradually work up to them. In the same way, you work up to concentration. You bring the mind as long as you can to the breath. And the next time you bring it as long as you can then. Just keep doing your best and your best will get better and better.

So be very clear about what's happening, and at the same time develop the proper attitude, realizing that this is a problem everybody goes through. It doesn't mean that you're a bad meditator. It's just one of the stages that we all have to go through. This is the pattern that the Buddha himself followed on the night of his awakening. If you've ever read about his awakening, there were three knowledges that he developed before he attained nibbana. The first was knowledge of his past lives. He was thinking about eons and eons: That was where he lived, this was his name, this was his appearance. It's interesting what the texts focus on: his name, his appearance, the food he ate, his pleasure and pain that he experienced in that lifetime, then how he died and moved on to the

next life. That's life pretty much: name, appearance, food, pleasure and pain, death, birth again. Name, appearance, food, pleasure and pain, death and birth again. Principally it was knowledge about his own personal narrative, how he had come to where he was right then.

But then he didn't stop at his own story. The next question was does this apply to everybody?

In second knowledge he gained between 10 p.m. and 2 a.m., he saw that all beings die and are reborn. And he had the further realization that when they die and are reborn, the nature of their rebirth is dependent on their past actions. The unskillful and skillful actions that they did set up the conditions for being miserable or happy. He saw the larger pattern by moving from his own personal narrative to a more universal view, realizing that it wasn't just him, everybody went through the same process. We had that chant just now: "I'm subject to aging, illness and death, subject to separation. I am the owner of my actions." In the actual sutta that the chant is drawn from, the contemplation doesn't stop there. It goes on to reflect that all living beings are the owners of their actions. All living beings are subject to aging, illness and death. That larger perspective puts things into perspective.

That's what the Buddha did with his second knowledge. He got things in a larger perspective. But that didn't constitute awakening either. After all, memory of past lives, visions of the universe, visions of beings dying and being reborn: That's not proof that these things actually happen. The Buddha wanted to know how to test the proof of these things. So he focused on that principle in the second knowledge, the principle of action. What was action? Action primarily is intention. It's a mental factor. He realized that your actions are determined by how you view things. So how about just looking at action in and of itself, intention in and of itself? Where do you look? Well, you look at the present moment.

This is what brought him to the present moment, to focus on what was happening in his mind right then and there—in particular, how his actions led to suffering and how other actions might lead to the end of suffering. That's how he framed his approach to the present moment, by looking in terms of cause and result, skillful and unskillful. That way of framing the issue led to his awakening.

It's important to reflect on this as we go through the same process as well. We start with our own personal narrative and try to get into the present moment. If your narrative is messy, one thing to do is start cleaning up your narrative. In other words, if you try to get the mind to be quiet and start thinking about all the ways in which you were stingy or harmful to other people, it's hard to settle down. This is why meditation is part of a larger training, training in being generous and being virtuous, abstaining from things that are harmful, and helping people in whatever ways you can. That brings a good narrative to the meditation cushion.

But even then, before you get into the present moment, the Buddha recommends that you start thinking in a more universal way because otherwise there's that problem I mentioned just now. You sit there you think, "Gosh, I'm a miserable meditator. I can't do this." But when you realize that everybody faces the same problems, it's a lot easier to stick with it. There's less personal recrimination and more of a balanced, equanimous, objective view. And not just

that. The questions you're bringing into the present moment depend on what your larger view is.

Often we hear that mindfulness is enough. Like the Beatles' old song: All you need is love. The refrain in a lot of Buddhist circles is: All you need is mindfulness. Well why? What's good about mindfulness? What is mindfulness? How does it function? You've got to have a view about these things. This is why, when the Buddha identified the most important internal quality in the practice, he didn't say mindfulness. He said appropriate attention, something we hardly ever hear of in Dhamma talks. "Attention" means how you frame the issue, how you frame the way you approach the present moment, how you look at things, the questions you ask. This attention can either be appropriate in terms of putting an end to suffering or inappropriate if it's not effective at all, if it actually creates more suffering. And the appropriate way to attend to the present moment is the same way the Buddha did: getting a sense of your intentions and seeing where they're skillful and where they are not.

Now intentions can be pretty slippery things. This is why we start the meditation with a specific intention: Very consciously say to yourself, "I'm going to stay here with the breath." Only when you set up an intention like that and try to maintain it do you start seeing other undercurrents of intention in the mind. The intention that wants to think about issues from the day, saying, "Here we have a whole hour free time, let's think about family issues or let's think about work issues." You might not have noticed that intention if you hadn't set up the prior intention to stay with the breath. You would have slipped off to those other thoughts without realizing that there was any conscious intention there at all. So, for the time being, the skillful intention you want to maintain is the one that stays with the breath, that makes the breath comfortable. This is an important aspect. If the breath is uncomfortable, you won't want to stay. You may have the intention but it won't have any friends. It's facing what they call the armies of Mara.

So you need allies. One way of creating an ally is to make the breath your friend. See what kind of breathing feels good in the body right now: long breathing, short breathing, heavy breathing breath feels right. You can experiment to see. This makes it more interesting. And right there, you've got a lesson in skillful and unskillful intentions. Some intentions to change the breath end up with an uncomfortable, tight, restricted, or tense sense of the breath. You don't want that so you drop those intentions. Other intentions create a greater sense of ease. You realize that your intentions don't always show their results only in a next lifetime. Often your intentions show their results right now. That's an important lesson. Because the breath is so sensitive to events in the mind, it's a good way of testing this principle.

As Ajaan Lee used to say, when you meditate you want the right intention, the right object, and the right quality. Here the right object is the breath. Because it is so sensitive to the mind—it's where the mind and the body meet—that makes it an ideal object to focus on. The right intention is the intention is to stay there with the breath. And then the third factor is the right quality: the quality of the breathing that feels good, the quality of the mind that's willing to be friendly with the breath, explore the breath, learn about the breath, it's willing to test things and then observe the results.

When my teacher Ajaan Fuang taught meditation, those are two words he liked to use a lot: Test things, he would say, and then be observant. And at first, you might not be too confident in what you're observing, but over time you begin to develop a sense, "Oh, this little hint shows that the mind is about ready to go. This is how I can recognize breathing that's good for the body, this is how I can recognize breathing that's good for the mind, this is how I can recognize breathing that's good for neither." You learn to interpret the clues. At first your conclusions have to be tentative. But remember, we are working on a skill here. It takes time to develop a skill but these are the qualities you need. You want to have the desire to work on the skill, you want to be persistent, stick with it, and be intent on what you're doing. Be really observant. Then finally use your intelligence to ask questions, bring that property of appropriate attention to what you're doing. When things don't work, use your imagination, use your ingenuity to figure out other ways of making them work. You can't expect all the instructions to come in the book.

It's like learning any skill. In the beginning you start with instructions that come in the book or what the teacher says. Ajaan Lee's example is of weaving a basket. You weave a basket as the teacher tells you to, then you look at: It looks pretty crummy. But instead of giving up, you say, "Let's weave another basket." Try to learn from your mistakes with the first one. Why was the weaving uneven? Does the basket look too short? Too fat? Does it look crooked? What can you do to make it better? This is where instead of learning from the teacher, you start learning from the straw or whatever it is you use to weave the basket. You start learning from your basket, you learn from your efforts, you learn from your mistakes.

People who tend to engage in a lot of self recrimination find this hard. This is why it's good to think about that universal principle, that everybody has to go through this stage. And it's an important stage because you refine your discernment as you do this. Discernment is the quality that's going to purify the mind. It's going to lead you to awakening. You can't sit here and simply hope for awakening to come out of the sky and whap you across the head. It comes from refining your discernment so that you see what's going on. You see where your intentions are skillful, you see where your intentions are unskillful. And ultimately you see what lies beyond intention. Because it's in your freedom to make choices right here in the present moment: That's the spot where freedom should be investigated. The potential for freedom is going to be found right around here.

This is why the Buddha has you focus on issues of your actions, your intentions, and their results. The really liberating potential of your awareness lies right around there. So this is where you want to look. This is why appropriate attention is the most crucial factor in the practice, the approach that looks at all of this as a skill that you're working on in the hopes of becoming more and more skillful in how you act, more and more skillful in how you evaluate the results of your actions, and how you learn from your mistakes.

When you bring this quality of appropriate attention to the present moment, you're setting your practice on the proper footing. And then in that context you develop mindfulness. In other words, you try to keep the breath in mind. You try to keep this perspective, the perspective of trying to be skillful in mind. And then

you can be alert to what's actually happening, interpreting it within that framework of what's skillful and what's not, the framework of that larger view that helps make sure that you don't get tied up in how you're a miserable meditator, or how this is never going to work. You just drop that. Everybody goes through the stage of being a miserable meditator. The good meditators are the ones who don't stop there. They learn from their mistakes. So keep that perspective in mind.

That's how the skill of meditation can begin to show its stuff, what it really can do for you. Every time you sit down to meditate, always try to keep that framework in mind, that perspective in mind. Because that's what makes progress possible. That's what focuses you in the present moment in the proper way. We always hear that meditation means being in the present moment. It doesn't mean just being there. You've got to know what to look for, what questions to ask. And that's where the faculty of appropriate attention points you in the right direction.