

A Thread Out of the Maze

June 23, 2006

There's a question the Buddha has you ask yourself every day: "Days and nights fly past, fly past. What am I doing right now?" The reason he wants to ask yourself this question is to keep reminding yourself that what you're doing is really important. What you're doing makes all the difference in the world.

So what *are* you doing right now? Try focusing on your breath. See how the breathing feels, notice where you can see the breath clearly, and then stay there for a while. It might be the tip of the nose, the rising and falling of the chest, the rising and falling of the abdomen, or, on a more subtle level, the movement of energy through the body as you breathe in, the movement of energy as you breathe out. Notice to see if it's comfortable. If it's not, you can change. Make the breath deeper, more shallow, faster, slower, longer, shorter, heavier, lighter. You don't have to force it to change in these ways. Just think, and it's amazing: The mere power of thought can change the way you breathe.

Simply reminding the body that it can breathe in a different way, that it doesn't have to breathe in ways that are uncomfortable: This is one freedom they'll never take away from you, the freedom to breathe in a comfortable way. But most of us don't take advantage of it. So here's an opportunity to develop a sense of ease, and a sense of well-being inside, that's immediate, doesn't have to depend on anybody else. All has to depend on is your powers of observation, your mindfulness, your alertness, your powers of concentration, and the subtlety of your discernment.

Why is this important? The choices we make in life depend on how we feel in the present moment. You could think of this as a selfish indulgence, sitting here breathing in a comfortable way, while the rest of the world is suffering, but remember, all the things you do and say and think come out of how you feel in the present moment. The cruelties that people inflict on one another in the world come from the fact that they feel threatened or ill at ease.

Kindness to others has to come from learning how to be kind to yourself. When you have a sense of ease, a sense of well-being, and the breath gets really comfortable, when you think of it permeating the entire body, a sense of ease permeating the entire body, a sense of rapture suffusing everything from the top of the head down to the tips of fingers and the tips of toes: When you have that sense of well-being, and it's attainable simply by the way you look at the breath, why would you want to harm anyone? Why would you say anything that you

would later regret? Why would you want to do anything you would later regret? The things we do and say and think that harm ourselves and others come from the fact that we don't know how to take care of ourselves in the present moment.

So here's a chance to take care of yourself, look after yourself, try to get more and more sensitive to how the movement of your mind affects the way you breathe, and to how that creates a sense of well-being or dis-ease that you carry around in the body. As you focus on this issue, you begin to see more clearly the power of your intentions, the power of your actions in the present moment. You can choose to take advantage of this potential for well-being in the body, or you can choose not to. You've got that power of choice. Most of us haven't been exercising that freedom, and so the potential, the possibility, just gets wasted.

So what are you doing right now? Are you wasting that possibility or are you taking advantage of it? The Buddha's teachings all start with this issue of: What are you doing? This is why karma is such an important teaching. It underlies everything else. Mundane right view starts with the teaching on karma, that our actions have results, and the results depend on the quality of the intention behind the action.

That's where the Buddha has you start, because for most of us, we don't like to look at our actions. We say things that we regret having said and then we learn to turn a blind eye to them, pretending that we didn't intend anything wrong—or that we didn't really say it or even if we did, we didn't really harm anybody. The same with things we do, the things we think. This is an area where we really tend to be blind. We don't like to think that our lives are so thoroughly shaped by our own actions. We look at our lives and see that this is wrong and that's wrong, and we don't like to trace it back to anything we did.

So one of the first things the Buddha has you do is look precisely at this issue. Try to get a sense of the power of your actions, the freedom you have in the present moment to make choices. Then work with that power of choice and choose to be more generous. Think of how you've benefited from the generosity of others, how it's been such a good force in your life, and now you have the opportunity be generous in return. Think of the times when people could have harmed you but they didn't, and now you have the opportunity to develop that quality, the quality of restraint, the quality of virtue as well. Then live your life with those thoughts in mind. Take advantage of this freedom that you have to choose in the present moment, the freedom of intention. Learn to use it in a skillful way.

Once you start using it in a skillful way, you start becoming more and more willing to look at the power of your intentions, to admit the mistakes you made in the past, and resolve that you don't want to make them again in the future.

This ability to stay with your breath in the present moment to develop a sense of ease is a huge help in that direction. It's easy to be generous when you're feeling suffused with the ease and rapture. It's easy to be virtuous, to refrain from saying and doing things you know are harmful, when you have this sense of ease and rapture filling the body.

So the skills of developing the breath, working with the breath: These are your friends, because they allow you to see your own actions more clearly—both in making you more sensitive, and in putting you in a position where you're more willing to admit your mistakes and to learn from them.

It's in the context of the teaching on action that the Buddha teaches the more transcendent version of right view as well: the teaching on suffering, the cause of suffering, the possibility of an end to suffering, and what you can do to put an end to suffering. If your suffering weren't dependent on your actions, there'd be nothing you could do to stop it. It's because it *is* dependent on your actions: That's why the path to the end of suffering makes sense.

As you become more and more willing to look at your actions, you're more capable of developing the refinement, the precision, the powers of perception that allow you to see where you're on the path to the end of suffering, where you're off. You see things more and more clearly in these terms.

This is how mundane right view develops into transcendent right view. You see that there is suffering in your life, and you've been causing it. This is not to say other people haven't done horrible things. They have. You don't have to look very far into history. You don't have to look very far even into the newspaper these days to see all the horrible things that people are choosing to do. But the reason your mind is so weighed down with suffering is because of the things *you're* doing. This sounds like bad news to some people, but it actually is good news, because you can learn to change what you're doing, act in ways that are less harmful to yourself, act in a ways that are less harmful to others. This takes a huge burden off the mind, and allows you to see the more subtle and precise ways in which even the movements of the mind can cause stress of a more subtle form.

When you focus on that, learn how to stop that. Again, it's a choice. You have that freedom. This is why the Buddha has us focus again and again and again on this issue of our intention, because that's where in the present moment freedom is to be found. So pursue that: Why do you have this freedom of intention? The Buddha points out that what we do and say and think doesn't have to be totally

determined by the past. We have freedom of choice. Explore that. That's the window to total freedom.

So working with the breath is not a distraction from the larger things we want from the practice. We're actually following the string that leads us out of the maze. Set up the intention to stay with the breath. Set the intention to breathe comfortably. Try to stick with it. Simply trying to stick with the intention will help you see all the strange other intentions that come floating through the mind, and the way the mind will take on an intention that might be detrimental to it, but it doesn't have to. That's the important point: You don't have to make unskillful choices. You can learn to make your choices more and more skillful.

This is why the path is a gradual one, because it's like developing any skill. You work at it again and again and again, gradually becoming more skillful and observant, and suddenly you see something you didn't see before, and the only reason you see it is because of what you've been doing, because you've focused on this issue. So bit by bit by bit, you develop more powers of sensitivity. Even though you're looking in the same place, you start seeing things you didn't see before, not because they weren't there before, but simply because your powers of perception were not yet that strong, not that subtle. But if you look again and again and again, you become more familiar with the territory, your powers of perception grow, and you see more and more the subtle things that are going on. Finally your powers of perception get so subtle that you can see even the slightest movements in the mind, even the slightest stress, and you realize you have the choice again not to do that, not to create that stress. And it's in seeing that, that the ultimate freedom can be found.

So this is where we pick up the string, the string that can take us out of the maze of all the suffering we've created for ourselves. Keep following it to see where it leads and you won't be disappointed.