

Harmless & Clearheaded

March 10, 2007

We're going to meditate for an hour, so first get your body into position. Find a comfortable posture, try to keep your back straight, face forward, close your eyes. Place your hands on your lap, your right hand on top of the right. That's the body in position.

Next step, get the mind in position. Think thoughts of goodwill, like the chant we had just now. "May all beings be happy." Remind yourself that there's no good reason to wish ill on anybody. "May all beings find true happiness." The world would be a much better place if everybody could learn to look inside for happiness, instead of looking outside. So once you've thought those thoughts, now start looking inside yourself. That's the best way to start.

Focus on your breath. Know when it's coming in; know when it's going out. Try to breathe comfortably. Don't force the breath. You're not trying to put yourself into a trance, you're simply here to follow the way the breath feels, all the way in, all the way out. You can focus on any part of the body where the sensation is clear that now the breath is coming in, now the breath is going out.

And explore to see what rhythm of breathing feels best. Try long breathing, short breathing, or longer or shorter, or more middling, deeper or more shallow. heavy or light or faster or slower. There are lots of ways of experimenting with the breath, which not only makes it more comfortable but also makes it more interesting to sit here. Here it is, this energy in your body that keeps you alive. It has a huge impact on the health of the body, and for most of us, it's an area that we've hardly even looked at, much less explored. So here's a chance to explore. Try to maximize your inner resources here. See what sense of ease and well-being you can develop simply by the way you breathe.

There are two main advantages to the sense of ease that comes this way. One, it's not taking anything away from anyone else. And two, it's a very clear-sighted ease. It comes from a skill, instead of coming from simply indulging yourself in sensual pleasures. It keeps the mind bright, clear, able to see what's going on. This was the ease the Buddha realized could form an important part of the path.

You probably know something of the story of his life. And it centered around this question of how to find a happiness that on the one hand is clear-sighted and on the other hand causes no harm to anybody, yourself or anyone else.

There are two passages in the Canon where he talks about the things he reflected on before he went out into the forest, one in which he reflects on how he

was intoxicated with his youth, with his health, and with his life, looking down on people who were old or sick or dead. Then one day he came to his senses, realizing that someday he, too, would be old, sick, and then dead. So the pride he felt around his youth, his health, and his life was not really becoming, and it was setting him up for a major fall. So that was one problem with all the sensual pleasures he was enjoying. They had him intoxicated. He was drunk, couldn't see things clearly. He had to get away from those pleasures if he wanted to see anything clearly at all.

There's another passage, though, where he talks about seeing the world like a dwindling puddle. The water is getting less and less and less in the puddle, and the fish are fighting one another over the water, flopping all around. Of course the longer they flop around, the more the puddle dwindles away. This is another vision of the happiness that most of us go for: dwindling resources, more and more of us. And to get pleasure, you've got to fight other people off. It's a zero-sum game or less than a zero-sum game because the resources are dwindling all the time. So when he reflected on that kind of happiness, he saw that, one, not only was it intoxicating and blinding, but two, it was also causing a lot of harm.

So he went off into the forest and he started going to the other extreme, trying to deny himself every pleasure imaginable. He wouldn't let himself breathe. He hardly ate anything at all. He got so thin that he would faint every time he would urinate or defecate. He kept that up for six years.

Now, when you deny yourself pleasure of any kind at all, you know what keeps you going. Pride. So that was the second amazing turnaround in his life. The first one, of course, was simply leaving the palace. Think about all the famous wealthy and powerful people nowadays. How many see through the sham of their fame and their wealth and their power, and abandon it all, go live in the wilderness? It's pretty remarkable that anyone would do that at all. But that's what the young prince did.

The second amazing turnaround in his life was when he realized that those six years of austerities were not getting him anywhere, either. He was willing to abandon the pride that had kept him going.

He thought back to a moment from his childhood. His father had been plowing—in the Canon, it simply says that his father was plowing, the commentary insists that he was engaged in a royal plowing ceremony—but either way, the young prince was sitting under a tree and his mind settled down in a state of ease and concentration simply focused on the breath coming in and going out, with a sense of ease and rapture in the simple process of breathing. There was an awareness filling the body. The question came to him: "Could that be the way to

awakening? “And he intuited that it could. But then the next question came: “Why am I afraid of that pleasure? Is there anything blameworthy about it?”

The more he reflected on it, the more he realized that it wasn't blameworthy in either way. One, it wasn't intoxicating, didn't blind him to what he was doing, and, two, it didn't take anything away from anyone else. So it was a blameless pleasure. So he realized there was nothing to fear. All he needed to do was to start eating again and he'd have the strength of body he needed to get the mind back into that state of concentration.

Then he followed that concentration, and it provided the basis for the knowledge that led to awakening, to total release: a happiness that wasn't dependent on any conditions at all, inside or out.

So as we're sitting here, we're following his path, trying to put aside the two extremes of sensual indulgence and self-torture, and see if we can develop a happiness that's totally harmless and clearheaded. Now, it takes work. Developing a sense of ease and rapture in the breath isn't something that comes automatically. You've got to work at it. You've got to think about the breath, you've got to watch the breath, you've got to evaluate the breath, which means you're working on a skill. You can listen to the Dhamma and hear all the wonderful things the Buddha has to say about goodwill, compassion, empathetic joy, equanimity, concentration, discernment, and release. It's good to hear about those things, because it opens our minds to possibilities that we might miss otherwise. It expands the range of our imagination.

But simply hearing about them is not enough. As with any skill, you read a recipe in a book, but that's not the same as actually fixing the food and getting to taste it. Or when you read about how to swim, it's not the same as actually getting into the water and learning about your body through the process of learning how to swim. It's one thing to hear about the fact that people can focus on their breath and develop a sense of ease and rapture, it's another to actually give it a try.

And often what we first run into are our own defilements. Our greed, anger, delusion, distraction, or pain all get in the way. These are obstacles or hindrances.

So we have to do our best to overcome them and not get discouraged when we see them. I don't know how many people give up their meditation and say: “I can't meditate. My mind is too distracted.” It's like saying, “I can't go to the hospital to have my disease treated because I'm too sick.” If you're sick, you have to do whatever is required to get to the hospital, to get to the doctors so that they can treat your illness. And same with the mind: When the mind is distracted by pleasures that are intoxicating or harmful, you've got to do something about it,

because otherwise if the mind is left to stay in its old ways, it's like an illness that's simply allowed to run its course. It can do permanent damage. It can kill you.

So if you see that your mind is distracted, that should give you all the more encouragement that you've got to learn how to figure out ways of getting it back on the object you've chosen to concentrate on. If you find that simply focusing on the breath is not compelling enough or forceful enough, give yourself a meditation word. *Buddho* is a common one: *bud-* with the in-breath, *dho* with the out-. It means awake. Or you can use any word that helps keep you focused on the breath.

If you have trouble focusing on the breath, you can start with thoughts of goodwill. Return to something you find encouraging or inspiring: goodwill for all beings. Think about that for a while until it gives rise to a sense of ease and well-being inside. Here you are, sitting not wishing ill for anybody. Think of all the people out there who are wishing for harm, hoping for harm, wanting to kill, wanting to maim, wanting to see somebody else get theirs, and you're not indulging that. You're lifting your mind up above that. That can give rise to a sense of refreshment within.

You can think about the Buddha, the Dhamma, the Sangha—anything you find inspiring. Once the mind has a sense of well-being, then notice how you're breathing in the midst of that well-being and then try to maintain that kind of breath, that kind of well-being as a means of tuning into what kind of breathing really feels good. Then try to maintain it and keep it going.

This is something you've got to work at every day, so that it becomes a skill. As with any other skill, it requires practice. One, you have to want to do it. Two, you have to stick with it. Three, you have to be very observant, really pay close attention to what you're doing. And finally, use your imagination; use your ingenuity. When things aren't going well, try to figure out ways that help it along. This way, you begin to master the Buddha's skill, and it changes the balance of power in your mind, because now you have access to a sense of ease, well-being, pleasure. It's better than the things we normally pursue. It doesn't harm anybody, doesn't take anything away from them.

You may have noticed that chant we had just now, reflecting on the requisites. It's meant to remind you that simply by being alive and having this body requires food, clothing, medicine, shelter—things that involve suffering for somebody. Even if you eat vegetarian food, the farmers, the people who transport the food suffer in getting it to you. It's not easy work keeping people fed. The same goes for clothing and shelter and medicine. There's always some suffering, there's always a burdensomeness, simply in the fact that we've got this body and have got to keep

it going. Then, on top of that, if you look for extra pleasures that impose on other people, you create even more of a burden.

This is even more reason to try to work on a sense of ease that doesn't have to require burdening anybody outside, and at the same, creates fewer and fewer burdens for yourself. You don't have to go out and buy the breath. You don't have to borrow anybody's breath. You've got the breath right here. If you're wise, you take advantage of what you've got right here, learn to develop the resources immediately at hand. You can develop a sense of ease and well-being that's harmless and clearheaded, that allows you to understand your mind better, to see what you're doing more clearly, so that you're less and less inclined to cause harm to anyone else or to yourself.

So do your best to try to develop this skill. It's the most useful skill you can have as a human being. It'll see you through all kinds of difficulties and give you a sense of inner stability, security. You have your own inner refuge, no matter what happens outside.