

Old Movies & New

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One of the best ways to get the mind to stay with the breath is to realize that there's a lot going on here when you breathe. It's not just in and out. The energy flow of the whole body is involved.

And for most of us that's *terra incognita*: a place we don't know, unexplored jungle. But when you begin to explore it bit by bit, you find a spot in the body that's sensitive to the breathing. It tells you when the breath is coming in, when the breath is going out. You begin to sense that there are ways of breathing that are comfortable and ways of breathing that are not. One way of alerting yourself to that is to try breathing in different ways. Try deep breathing for a while, then more shallow breathing, and see how your spot feels. See how it feels when the breath is fast, when it's slow, when it's heavy, when it's light. Experiment with it. And you see there's a lot to study, there's a lot to notice here.

In that way, your concentration becomes not just a matter of forcing the mind but of drawing the mind in: giving it something to explore, something to learn about, so that even if it doesn't settle down as solidly as you'd like it to, at least you've learned something in the course of the hour. And that will make you interested in coming back the next time with more to learn, more to discover.

As the Buddha said, once you're aware of long breathing and short breathing, the next part of the path is to train yourself to be aware of the whole body as you breathe in, the whole body as you breathe out. As you try to be aware of the whole body, there's lots to see. Why does the Buddha have you do that? For one reason, when you're aware of the whole body you're not just on one little spot. And when you're not just on one little spot, it's a lot easier to stay awake, to stay firmly established here in the present moment. If your awareness is small, it can slip off very easily.

It's almost as if the way to past thinking and future thinking is a little tube. If the mind is small, it can fit down the tube. But if your awareness is broad, it won't fit. You've got it inhabiting the whole body, from the head down to the feet, down to the hands. It's too big to fit into the past or the future.

Because what happens is when you're thinking of the past and future, you turn part of your body awareness into that little world. There's a physical side to all your thoughts. The more complex the thought of the past or the future, the more territory it inhabits in your body. But one of the easiest ways of making sure it doesn't turn into a foundation for thoughts of past and future is to occupy it as

fully as you can with awareness right here and now, so that when the breath calms down, thoughts of past and future won't move into the place where it's been calm. You've got to occupy it here with reference to the present moment. Otherwise, thoughts of past and future will occupy it.

Now, you find even as you get more and more interested in the breath, there will still be a pull to thoughts of the past, thoughts of the future, because the mind is used to that kind of thinking, that kind of entertainment. It's like movies. And most of the movies we watch while we're meditating tend to be old movies, things that have been on the movie channel night after night after night. And once nothing seems to be happening in the meditation right now, you get bored. And you can think, "Well, I'd rather be entertained by x," and there you go.

There are two ways of dealing with this. One is to look at the movies you tend to look at. What are they like? What kind of hero or heroine are you in those movies? A lot of times it'll be things that you're angry about, things that you're worked up about. And we like to think about these things. This is one of the paradoxes of the mind. Stories where we suffer, stories where we're miserable, where other people take advantage of us: We like to think about those things.

What's the hook? Well, part of it is that we like being portrayed as the victim, because someplace in the story the victim gets revenge and has to come out on top. Or if the victim doesn't come out on top, that's because the world was stacked against the victim, so there's a justification if the victim's not doing well. Ask yourself, "What's the allure of those kinds of stories? Why do you like watching those old movies? What do you get out of them?" Garbage. You really don't want to identify with the part of the mind that gets its kicks this way, finds its entertainment this way. That's one way of dealing with those old movies.

The other is to create new movies. The Buddha has a whole series of recollections that are legitimate types of meditation and they involve thinking. Don't get the idea that all meditation is a matter of just staying in the present moment without thinking about anything else at all. Sometimes the Buddha has you think about the past, about the past times when you've been generous, virtuous, or held to your principles.

What this does is that it brings new narratives to the present moment. Some of the old narratives that are unskillful are hard to unravel. The more you think about them, the worse you feel about yourself, and you just tie yourself up in knots. But if you can think in terms of the good things you've done in the past—times you've been virtuous, times you've been generous—and you follow through with those thoughts, it leads naturally to wanting to meditate. Well, here you are, you're meditating. So the narrative brings you into the present moment again, and

it's easy to put the narrative down.

So if you find that the mind has a need to entertain itself with movies, give it some good movies, movies that will bring it back into the present moment. Sometimes it's possible to drop the old movie and come to the present moment without much fuss. But if you find it difficult, come up with a new storyline, a storyline that builds on the fact that your real happiness in life has come from the times you were generous, the times you were forgiving, the times you could have done something against your principles and might have benefitted from it but you decided No, you were going to stick with your principles. Those kinds of movies are really uplifting. And when they lift you up, where do they lift you? They lift you up to the present moment when you're meditating.

Some other movies that are useful to think about are the skills you've developed in the past, issues that you had to work hard at to master and you finally did. Those are useful because they actually give you lessons in meditation: lessons in how discipline can pay off, lessons in how things might not look like they're going to work out in the beginning but ultimately they do, lessons in how to apply desire to the path. Because desire does play a role: It's part of right effort.

The issue is how to make sure that the desire is your friend in the path and not your enemy. There are so many ways that you can sit here wanting, wanting, wanting and it doesn't bring anything about at all. In fact, gets in the way. But there are other desires that actually help you: the desire to stay with the next breath and then the next breath, then the next; the desire to do this skillfully. If you don't do it right, well, come back again and try it again.

If you've had any experience with making art, you should know that there are times where you spent a lot of time on something and you looked at it and you realized it was trash. So you threw it out and you started all over again. Having learned from what turned out to be trash is not totally a waste of time, because you learned from your mistakes. And you can do the same with your meditation. You make mistakes: Well, what can you learn from them? The same process is involved here.

So those are other movies that you can play: the movies where you put in effort, put in time, had to use your powers of observation, use your ingenuity, and you came out with a skill. Take those lessons and apply them here.

So if you find that the mind has a need for movies, and it doesn't go back to the old classics, it tends to go back to the old B and C movies: If you notice that happening, you say, "Well, no. I'd rather have an uplifting movie, a movie that brings me into the present moment in the best shape possible to meditate."

That's a legitimate part of the meditation: learning how to be a good movie

director, a good script writer. Because the best movies are the ones that take you out of the movie theater and back into the present moment, emotionally and intellectually ready to tackle the issues of the breath.

It's all a part of the practice.