

A Home for the Mind

November 2, 2007

Take a couple of good long deep in-and-out breaths. Ventilate your body. And if deep breathing feels good, keep it up. If not, you can change. Just pose the question in your mind: What kind of breathing would feel good right now? You may go around in different parts of your body and ask your arm: What kind of breathing would feel good for you? Your chest. Your abdomen. Your head. Your legs, your feet: Ask the different parts of the body, "What kind of breath would you like right now?" Give it to them.

What you're doing is creating a home for the mind in the present moment. Most of us are homeless. The mind wanders around, tries to find rest here, rest there, but as with a homeless person, the places where we try to find rest are not really restful, they're not really comfortable. Either they're cold or they're hot, When the police come along, they chase us away. We've got to find a spot that's really ours, not only a place where we can stay, but also a place where we can keep other people out, i.e., all the thoughts that tend to invade the mind. For most of us, our mind is like a bus station. The doors are wide open 24 hours a day. Anything can come in. Some people, when they come in, don't leave. They hang around and do strange things in the dark corners of the restrooms.

So you've got chase them out and turn this bus station back into a home. For the time being, you don't have anything to do with anybody else, just stay with your breath as if there were in no one else in the world right now. You have no responsibilities. Don't worry about tomorrow. Don't think about today. Just be right here. Try to make your sense of the body in the present as comfortable as you can by the way you breathe and by the way you conceive of the breath energy. After all, the breath is not just air coming in and out of the lungs. It's a flow of energy throughout the nerves, all along your blood vessels, out to the pores.

You'll find there are lots of different kinds of energy in the body. Sometimes the energies are still, sometimes they flow up, flow down. Sometimes you notice, when you breathe in, that certain parts of the body seemed to have an energy that goes up; other parts have an energy that seems to go down. When you notice this, then you can ask yourself, "Does it feel really good? How about if I switch directions?" Play around with this energy once you get sensitive to it and see what feels good, what doesn't feel good.

You're learning some important lessons here. One, you're learning about the power of your perceptions, the labels you put on things. For instance, you may

have a sensation of the arm that you can perceive it as totally solid, or you can remind yourself that the blood is flowing around in there, so it's not totally solid, there's liquid too. Then there's the warmth of the arm, and there's energy flowing in the arm. You can choose to focus on any of those aspects. The liquid and the breath energy are the good ones to focus on, because they can change. The breath, in particular, has no obstacles. If you tighten up the arm, that's usually the liquid. In other words, the blood gets locked up in some spots and doesn't flow as easily as through others.

But the breath energy always flows, but here again there's flowing energy and there's still energy. So you can hold that concept in mind. Then see how you can use that concept to make your arm more comfortable—and then your other arm, your torso, your legs. Inhabit your whole body. If you don't inhabit it, other things will. In other words, as you get really sensitive to the breath energy in the body, you begin to realize that when a thought arises in the mind, there's going to be tension in a certain part of the body. If you're fully aware of the whole body, there's no place for those thoughts to catch hold. They may come, but they just go right away, because they don't have any spot to latch on to.

This is an important skill, because the more you can fully inhabit your body, the more you're protected from vagrant thoughts, unskillful thoughts, and the energy of other people. Some of us are like sponges. We pick up the energy of the people around us. This can be good or bad, depending on the people. But it's best if you can create your own force field inside, and make it as impervious as possible.

That way, you have your home inside wherever you go, no matter what the situation. When you're alone, when you're with a lot of people, you still have that same energy filling the body. This allows you to settle down and have a sense of home, a sense of being able to rest. When you've had enough rest, then you can work. After all, just being in the present moment doesn't finish the job. It just puts you in the right place to really watch what's going on in the mind. Your life is shaped by your intentions, and if you want to see your intentions in action, this is where you've got to watch.

Now, when you're in the present moment, it's not the case that you totally forget the past. You want to remember lessons you learned as to what works and what doesn't work, and you try out those lessons in the present. Sometimes they'll work again, sometimes they won't.

The Buddha is not trying to lobotomize us. He wants us to remember the lessons we learned and find the right balance between being sensitive to the particular configuration of the present moment and also keeping in mind some of the larger principles at work in dealing, say, with greed or anger or delusion as they

arise, in dealing with pain, in dealing with pleasure—because sometimes pleasure can be dangerous, too.

This is why mindfulness is essential to the practice. Mindfulness actually means keeping something in mind. It's paired with alertness, which is what watches what you're doing in the present moment. You need the two of them together. Without mindfulness, it's hard to connect cause and effect, because sometimes the causes and effects are close in time and sometimes they're further apart. If you're alert, you can keep track of what's going on in the mind, the way you approach the breath, the way you stay with the breath, the way you handle distractions, and the results you get. This way, you learn what works and what doesn't work, and your meditation becomes a skill, not just a crapshoot.

The more you pay attention to what's going on, the more you pay attention to this principle of cause and effect, then the more you begin to discern suffering and its cause. The chant we had just now, about discerning suffering, sounds a little strange. You might think, "Of course we discern suffering. I can tell when I'm suffering." Well, it's one thing to be aware of suffering, and it's another to discern it. To discern it means you understand it: what it is, where it's coming from, what you can do to put an end to it. And to discern it, you have to be able to watch it carefully, without your usual agenda, which is to make it go away or to run away from it right away. You want to be able to sit with it.

This is why it's good to have this sense of being at home here. If you're dealing with suffering as you're wandering around on the street, that's difficult. But if you're dealing with suffering at home, you've got the amenities of home to help you.

So watch your mind to see what's going on. If you find strange people invading, chase them out. Try to occupy your full body, have your awareness fill the body, have the breath fill the body, to the point where it feels as if the breath and your awareness become one. Then keep watch over that state, protect it. When you notice anything coming to disturb it, let it go away. Don't grab on to it. Do your best to maintain it because this is where your home is.

Eventually as the Buddha said, you're going to get to the point where you don't need a home anymore, and the mind is totally beyond all locations. But as long as we're still in the stage where we need protection, where we need shelter, you can create this sense of shelter right here: a place to rest when you need to rest, a place you can do your work when you need to work. Make it your place. Provide yourself with a shelter.

It's in the process of providing a shelter that you learn an awful lot about the mind as you protect this state of mind. It's not the case that when you get the

mind to become still you're just stuck in concentration and can't gain any discernment. In the process of bringing the mind to concentration, you learn something about the mind; in the process of protecting that state of stillness, you're going to learn a lot about the mind as well. You begin to notice which things disturb it, which things you have to contemplate in a lot of detail in order to do away with them, and which things you can simply ignore, or breathe through and they'll go away. In the course of doing this, you learn a lot about the mind.

This is why the Buddha said that a good state of concentration requires both tranquility and insight. It's not the case that all the insight comes after the concentration. The ability see clearly is a prerequisite for good concentration as well. The concentration and the discernment help each other along. The more solid your concentration, the more refined your discernment. The quicker and more refined your discernment, the more you'll be able to protect your concentration and allow it to go deeper.

So try to find the right balance between the two, being both still and alert. It's when these two qualities work together that they get the best results: ease, clarity, a sense of fullness, a sense that the mind is healthy and not burdened down by the events of the world. This is how the mind becomes strong.