

Proactive Mindfulness

November 18, 2007

Focus on your breath. Where do you feel the breath right now? It might be at the tip of the nose where you feel the air coming in and going out, or it can be in any part of the body that moves as you breathe in, moves as you breathe out: the rising in the chest, the rising in the abdomen, any place where the movement of energy in the body tells you that now the breath is coming in, now the breath is going out. You can focus right there—and try to make your focus just right. In other words, don't clench up around that part of the body. If you do, then the breathing process starts getting uncomfortable, and the mind won't want to stay there. It'll want to move around, get away, think about other things, do other things.

So whatever spot in your body you're focused on, think of the breath energy flowing in, flowing out naturally, with nothing to obstruct it. At the same time, don't let your focus be so weak that you keep slipping off. You want to maintain continual focus. In Pali this is called *anupassana*, sticking with something, keeping track of something, continuing all the way through the in-breath, all the way to be out-, all the way through the spaces in between. That's how you establish mindfulness.

It's in the establishing of mindfulness that good qualities in the mind begin to grow. You're basically applying three qualities here: mindfulness, alertness, and ardency. Mindfulness means keeping something in mind. In this case, you're keeping in mind the fact that you want to stay with the breath. Mindfulness is not just a passive observing of whatever happens. That's a huge misunderstanding you hear almost everywhere. Mindfulness means keeping something in mind. If it's right mindfulness, you keep in mind the fact that you want to abandon unskillful qualities and develop skillful ones. Once you've developed them, you want to keep remembering to stay with them, to maintain them so that they can grow.

This is reflected in the way the Buddha describes the first steps of mindfulness of breathing. You start out by simply being aware whether the breath is short, whether it's long. The third step is to be aware of the whole body. You train yourself to do this. It's not going to happen naturally. Once you've been able to maintain your focus on your one spot, you try to expand your range of awareness so that it fills the whole body all the way through the in-breath, all the way through the out-. This requires some training.

Some people find it hard to maintain both the focus and the broadened awareness. One way to work toward it is to move your focus around deliberately, stay with, say, the center of the chest for a while and then move down to the abdomen or start at the abdomen and move up the centerline in front of the body: stomach, middle of the chest, the base of the throat, middle of the head, and then down on the back, out the legs, and then starting at the back of the neck and going down the arms. In other words, systematically go through the body and maintain your focus on the different parts of the body so that you can learn how to be sensitive to any part of the body while you're breathing in, while you're breathing out.

Notice how those different parts the body feel. If you're really sensitive, you'll begin to notice that with each in-and-out breath, there's going to be a subtle flow of energy throughout the whole nervous system. It goes very fast and is very subtle. But if you pay careful attention, you'll see it.

Now, in the course of doing this you'll find that some of what they call the breath channels in the body—where the energy flows in the body—get opened up. When the energy flow throughout the body gets opened up, then the need for heavy breathing gets reduced.

This takes you to the fourth step, which is to train yourself to calm the breath as you breathe in, calm the breath as you breathe out. You begin to notice that you have a lot of preconceived notions about what you have to do in order to get the breath to come in and to get it to go out, and you begin to realize you don't have to do all those things. It's like a young child learning how to walk: In the beginning, the child is going to move its arms, moves its head, all kinds of different parts of the body, because it hasn't figured out which muscles are necessary and which ones aren't. But over time, you begin to notice that you don't have to move your head so much, you don't have to move your arms so much. It's just the legs. The walking becomes easier.

The same with the breath: You begin to realize that the different cartoon notions you have of what you have to do in order to get the breath in, what you have to do in order to get it to come out, are really not all that accurate. You begin to sense the breath as a whole-body process, so that when you breathe in, there's energy coming in through all the pores, which means that it requires less pumping of the lungs.

These are things you train yourself to do. You don't just sit and watch them happen. You train yourself in this direction, which is part of right mindfulness. There's a passage where the Buddha says the duty of right mindfulness is to

remember to abandon unskillful qualities and to develop skillful ones. That's what you're doing here.

Alertness means watching what's going on, being aware of what's happening as it's happening, and in particular, being aware of what you're doing and the results of your actions.

Ardency means trying to do all this skillfully. In other words, if you begin to see that what's happening is not skillful, you decide to make it more skillful. You do your best. You develop the desire to make it more skillful. Sometimes we hear that desire is a bad thing in the practice, but it plays an important role in right effort, which is basically what ardency is. You have to *want* to do it right if it's going to happen. If you don't want to do right, it may happen a little bit, but it's not really going to happen continually.

So you develop the desire to foster these other skillful qualities you want to bring to the breath. As you bring them to the breath and stick with it, they do develop. They grow. The path is something to develop, to work at.

So we're doing some work here, but it's work in pleasure, in a sense of ease that can come when you feel that the whole body is breathing in, the whole body is breathing out. All the muscles throughout the body can stay relaxed all way through the in-breath, all the way through the out-. There's a sense of ease, a sense of fullness.

Even though it's work, there are immediate rewards once you tap into it, learning how to do it right. In the beginning, it may not happen right yet, so there's going to be a sense of frustration, a sense of impatience, but frustration and impatience don't create things or make them happen. You put in effort but you put in the effort skillfully. In other words, you just stick with it and don't try to anticipate when the results are going to happen. You just keep doing it. It's like planting a crop. You sow the seeds, the plants begin to grow, and you'd like to have them grow faster, but if you try to pull on them or stretch them to make them grow faster, they die. So you can't pull the plant. What you do is that you just keep watering the plants, tending to the soil, and trust that they'll grow of their own accord. And they do.

It's the same with meditation. The steps are simple but we tend to make things more complex by anticipation or impatience, wanting to get the results right away. We have to make the causes right, and then, once the causes are right, the results will come. So pay careful attention to these three things: mindfulness, alertness, and ardency. Those are the factors that will help the concentration to grow.

Just apply these qualities to this breath, and then to this breath. Don't think about how many breaths you've breathed so far, or how many more you're going to have to breathe through the rest of the hour. Just focus on doing things right for each breath as it comes. Then the skillful qualities we're working on will develop on their own accord.

You're taking a proactive role but you have to learn how to be skillful in being proactive. Think about other skills you've developed in the past and the qualities of mind that you brought to those skills, whether it was playing a musical instrument, learning to be a carpenter, or playing a sport. There's that element of desire to get the results, but you realize that if all you think about is the results you want without focusing on what you're doing, it's not going to happen. You have to learn how to focus very precisely on what you're doing and remember to do it right. Then, through trial and error, learn how to understand exactly what *right* is. That way, you'll get the right results.