

One Foot in the Present

November 29, 2007

When you focus on the breath in the present moment, you want to take that as your anchor. As long as you're with the sensation of the breath coming in, going out, at least you've got one foot in the present moment. You want to stay in the present moment not because it's a wonderful moment, but because it's an important moment. It's the moment where the mind is making its choices. Intentions arise here, and the results of your intentions also can be seen arising here. This is where you learn about intention, you learn about the causes of stress and pleasure, pain and ease, because you can see them happening in real time.

So try to keep at least one foot in the present. This doesn't mean that you totally forget the past or that you don't have any anticipations for the future. If you forgot the past, you'd be like a person who had a prefrontal lobotomy. You'd be totally lost. What you want to do is be more skillful in how you refer to the past, how you refer to the future, taking the present moment as your vantage point. Right now there are some things you want to remember from the past and other things you want to be able to put aside. For instance, remember that you're here to focus on the breath. You're here to get the mind to settle down. Don't forget that. And you're here because it's going to have a good impact on the future. Don't forget that, either.

What's important is that you learn how to put aside unskillful memories and unskillful anticipations. An unskillful anticipation is when you say to yourself that you want to get the first jhana tonight or the second jhana within this weekend. Setting goals like that in meditation is not useful, because you're focused too much on the results you want and not on the causes. It's better to set a goal to be mindful of this breath, and then this breath, and then this breath, and be fully aware of the whole body, say, for this breath, and the next, and the next, as each breath comes. In other words, focus your anticipation on the causes that are going to get the results.

And anticipate that you're going to make mistakes. If you make up your mind, "I'm going to sit here and nothing bad is going to happen, there are going to be no distractions at all, there are going to be no problems at all," you're setting yourself up for a fall.

Think about how the Buddha taught his son Rahula, about mistakes. He didn't say, don't make mistakes, He said, try not to make mistakes, but if you find that you do make a mistake, admit it, learn from it, make up your mind you're not

going to repeat it. In other words, he taught Rahula how to handle mistakes in a mature way. And it's the same with meditation. Anticipate that there will be distractions, you'll lose the breath in the course of the next hour. Just make up your mind that if you do catch yourself losing the breath, you're not going to berate yourself, you're not going to get upset. You'll just notice the fact that you've moved off the breath and come right back to it. Remember: It's normal, especially if you're new to the meditation. The mind isn't yet used to settling down for long periods of time, it feels lost, so it's going to try to find other things to entertain itself, to keep moving as it's always been moving. When you find it's doing that, just stop and come back.

In other words, when you make a mistake like that, remind yourself that you want to be mature about how you handle a mistake. That's putting yourself in a much better position. As for skillful and unskillful memories, you've heard meditation instructions and you decide you're going to apply certain instructions tonight, well, keep those in mind. As for other issues in the past, again the Buddha teaches a wise way of dealing with them. If you find yourself suddenly entangled in a past mistake, something you did that embarrasses you or actually harmed somebody, remember how he said that it doesn't do any good sit there and feel guilty about it or think about how you'd like go back and undo that mistake. Remorse and guilt can't go back and change the fact that you made a mistake. But then you have to ask yourself, are you the sort of person who can't make mistakes at all? We all make mistakes.

One of good things about Buddhism is that the person who founded it never pretended to have always been perfect. He started out imperfect just like us, so he knows what it's like to remember past mistakes. The Jataka tales, whether they're actually memories of the Buddha's true previous lives or not, are filled with mistakes made by the Buddha-to-be. So instead of trying to be a person who's never made mistakes, remind yourself, we all make mistakes. We've all harmed one another in our many lifetimes. And there's a mature attitude to take toward a mistake. One, resolve not to repeat it. Two, develop thoughts of unlimited goodwill, compassion, empathetic joy, and equanimity directed to the person you harmed, directed to yourself, and directed to all beings. These attitudes help to ensure that you'll be more likely to work from skillful motivations, skillful intentions as you act.

This way, having the proper attitude toward the present moment, toward what comes up in the present moment, helps you deal with past and future in a skillful way. Memories of the past appear *now*; anticipations of the future appear *now*. They're all present. They may refer to another timeframe, but what's actually

happening in the present is the arising of the memory, the arising of the anticipation. By giving yourself a good solid place to stay with the breath, you're putting yourself in a position where you can handle these things skillfully as events. The breath gives you a separate place to stand. So instead of finding yourself totally immersed in the past, you at least have one foot on the breath.

The same with mind states, the mental worlds that you can get involved in concerning the future: You don't have to be totally swallowed up by them. You've got one foot on the breath, which gives you a place to stand and watch these things. You remind yourself that whatever identity you had, say, in that past memory, you don't have to assume that identity now. You can pull yourself out. It's like giving yourself a separate place to stand.

The Buddha talks about *bhava*, these states of becoming, these little worlds we create in the mind. There's a very strong sense of location to them. When you actually go into that world, that's birth. Then you suffer from whatever the limitations that world might be.

Your way of getting out of that location is to give yourself another location, i.e., the breath in the present moment, the sense in the body as you feel it from within. This is called, *rūpa-bhava*, or a sense of the form of the body. It helps pull you out of those other worlds.

So try to stay in touch with the breath, the feeling of the process of breathing, the breath energy as it flows through all the breath channels in the body. The more fully you're present to the breath throughout the whole body, the more likely you are to understand the skillful and unskillful ways of dealing with thoughts of past and future. You're in a better position to deal with them more and more skillfully all the time.

So try to develop this sense of inhabiting your body right here, right now, as continually as you can, because this gives you a good place to stand. Without this, you're awash in your thoughts of the past, awash in the worlds of the future, and it's easy to drown. This gives you a place where you can come up for air.