

Acceptance

June 1, 2009

As you focus on the breath, see what kind of breathing feels best. You can focus on any spot in the body where you're sensitive to the sensation of breathing. It doesn't have to be where the air is passing through the nose. It can be the rise and fall of the stomach, the rise and fall of the chest, or anyplace in the body where you sense, "Now the breath is coming in; now the breath is going out." You can experiment with the breathing to see what would feel best right now. It may take a while to decide what you like. Sometimes you may settle into a rhythm that feels good, and then, after a while, it doesn't feel so good anymore. So you experiment some more.

This way, you're developing a lot of good qualities in mind all at once: To begin with, there's mindfulness, i.e., keeping the breath in mind. And then alertness: watching what's actually happening, what you're doing and the results of what you're doing. You're also showing goodwill for yourself, because the way you breathe has an immediate effect on how you feel in your body, where the mind is going to stay in the present moment. If you learn how to attend to yourself in this way, you're in a much better position to start feeling goodwill for other people. If you're feeling strung out or irritable, it's hard to have goodwill for anyone else because you're not showing goodwill to yourself.

So give yourself a good place to feed right here. You'll find that the mind, as it's feeding on a sense of well-being and strengthened by mindfulness and alertness, has more energy to put into practice, both the practice you're doing right now as you're meditating and other aspects of the practice in dealing with other people: being generous, being virtuous. These things require energy. So as you develop this energy in the mind right here, you're not the only one who's going to benefit. People around you benefit as well.

So you take what you've got and you make the best use of it. That's a basic principle in the practice. All the good qualities in the mind that the Buddha talks about developing—mindfulness, alertness, ardency, conviction, persistence, concentration, discernment: These are all things we have to some extent already. If we didn't have them at all, we wouldn't be human beings. It's simply a matter of taking stock of what we've got and having the conviction that if we develop these qualities, they're going to take us in the right direction.

So as you're developing a sense of acceptance of where you are, remember accepting where you are doesn't mean you're going to *stay* where you are. It's like

going into a kitchen. You open the refrigerator and you see what you've got and you try to make a good meal of whatever's there. If there are raw eggs in the refrigerator, you're not going to eat raw eggs. You've got to cook them. So here *acceptance* means accepting the fact that that's what you've got to work with today. You've got eggs in the refrigerator. You may originally have wanted a meal based on something else, but eggs are what you've got. There's no time to go down to the store and get something else. So you take what you've got and then you use your skill to make something good out of it. You make scrambled eggs. You make poached eggs, fried eggs, a soufflé. There are all kinds of things you could do with the eggs.

Simply sitting there and eating raw eggs is not what the Buddha meant by accepting things. It's hard to find the word *acceptance* in the Pali Canon. He does use the word contentment: You're content with what you start out with. You're content with the situation around you. If you had to wait until the situation around you was a perfect place to practice, you'd never get to practice—because there *are* no perfect places to practice. There's always something wrong, or somebody here you could criticize. But if you realize that what you've got is good enough to practice, then you allow yourself to be content with that. You allow yourself to be content with where you're starting out, but you don't content yourself with staying there.

The Buddha once said that the secret to his awakening was that he didn't allow himself to be content with whatever attainment he had. This didn't mean he rushed through everything really fast. After all, he was exploring, feeling his way. He had to explore and detect exactly what would work in his practice. Then when he found something with the potential to work, he had to develop it, sit with it for a while to see how far its potential could go.

It's the same for us with meditation. We sit with the breath. Any thinking about how you want to get into this stage of jhana, or gain that state of insight: It's not going to happen by your sitting here thinking about it. It's going to happen by staying with the breath. You realize that if you're going to find it, you're going to find it here, in the breath, in the state of mind that stays with the breath, that's mindful of the breath.

To think of it another way, it's like getting fruit on your tree. You want ripe fruit. But if, as soon as little fruits appear, you want to eat them right away, you're not going to get the ripe fruit—and you're not going to have anything really edible. So you stay here with the breath, knowing that right here, right where you're present with the breath, is where all the good things are going to appear.

Now, they may not appear yet, because you're not ready for them. Many things are already here but you're not sensitive enough to see them. In some passages, they talk about this being a very gradual path; in other passages, a very sudden one. The Buddha's image is of the continental shelf off of India. It slopes out gradually and then there's a sudden drop. The gradual slope is the practice of getting more and more sensitive to what's actually happening right here, and also getting more and more sensitive to what it means to practice the middle way, to know when you're putting too much pressure on things and when you're not put enough pressure on things. That sort of sensitivity you can develop only over time, through trial and error.

There's a passage where the Buddha talks about the seven aspects of a person of integrity. And the first two are to know the Dhamma and to know the meaning of the Dhamma. Those are things you can study, that you can learn from asking and discussing. But the remaining aspects have to do with your own sensitivity and your willingness to develop your sensitivity over time.

There's having a sense of yourself: What are your strengths right now? What are your weaknesses right now? Where are you right now in the practice? What are you capable of doing? What would it mean to push yourself too hard? What would it mean to push yourself too gently? Those sorts of things you learn only through trial and error.

Then there's a sense of enough: How much food is enough? How much sleep is enough? How much sitting, walking, is enough? Again, you've got to learn that through trial and error. You've got to learn how to observe these things.

There's a sense of the right time and place. How much time should be devoted to fixing up the monastery, and how much time should be devoted to just focusing on the monastery inside you? And what's the right time for all your various activities? What's the time to talk? What's the time now to talk? That you learn by trial and error.

Then there's having a sense of other people. When you meet with this group of people, how should you behave? When you meet with that group of people, how should you behave?

And when you meet up with different people, what kind of activities are praiseworthy and what kind of activities are blameworthy? If you see it in other people, of course it reflects back on yourself. The Buddha here is talking about the way people react to the Dhamma. Do they really listen? Do they not really listen? Even if they listen, are they really thinking things through or are they not? If they think things through, are they actually going to do a practice on them based on that?

The Buddha was not the sort of person who would refuse to judge other people. He did judge other people according to how much they were really interested in the Dhamma. After all, he was a teacher. He had to figure who was worth teaching and who was not, who was worth talking to about the Dharma, who was not.

You may not yet be a teacher, but there are times when you want to talk about the Dhamma, so you have to figure out: Who do you want to talk to? Who would you better off not talking to?

All these things are things you learn only through trial and error, by developing your own sensitivity, by posing that question in your mind: "Where am I in the practice?" As I said, that means accepting where you are, but also accepting the fact you've got some qualities that need developing by gaining sense of how much is enough practice, how much is too much, how much is too little, a sense of enough, a sense of the right time and place for things, and a sense of dealing with other people. These are the sorts of things that you learn gradually. And you have to use your own powers of observation to learn them. It takes time.

That's the gradual part of the practice. The sudden part is when you see things that have been here all along, simply that when your sensitivities have gotten matured, and you begin to sense, "Oh, I'm doing this. I'm doing that. That's skillful. That's not." You notice as you get deeper and deeper into concentration. You're on a certain level of concentration and you began to realize that that level of concentration is still not totally at peace, is still not totally quiet, it still has some level of stress. Then you figure out what you're doing that's causing the stress. As you stop that activity, the stress goes away, and you go into deeper level of concentration.

For instance, as you're evaluating the breath, there comes a point where you can't get it any better than it is. If you keep on evaluating, you're just spinning your wheels. That's when you need to content yourself with what you've got and you can settle into it, in a much deeper and more absorbed way. You actually become more One with the object of your meditation. You were controlling the breathing in the past, but now all of a sudden it's as if the breath is breathing you. You're One with the breath. There's a greater sense of rapture, a greater sense of refreshment and ease that come when you're ready to put aside the directed thought and evaluation. And so on down through the levels of concentration.

This becomes possible because you become more and more sensitive to what's actually here, what's actually going on. Things have been going on all the time, but you just haven't noticed them because your sensitivity hasn't been developed enough.

So that's the sense in which there's a gradual slope leading to a sudden drop-off. And the really sudden drop, of course, is when you have your first experience of the deathless. That's a radical change. But it comes from this practice of trying to be sensitive to what's going on, sensitive to what you're doing. As you focus on these issues of staying with the breath, being mindful, being alert, having a sense of how much pressure to put on the practice, how much is too much, how much is too little, your sensitivity grows. You become more observant. Then you start seeing things you didn't see before. They're right there in front of you. That's why the breakthroughs are sudden.

There's a lot to learn here. This is why, when the Buddha was talking about meditation, he would always compare it with different skills. As with any skill, the teacher can teach you the basic steps, but to get really good at it, you have to do it over and over and over again so that you get a better sense of what works and what doesn't work, and that you can develop your own powers of observation. You don't have to go running to the teacher with very little problem, because your own powers of observation become more reliable.

So you accept where you are but you don't accept that you're going to stay here. Or at least you're not going to stay here with the same level of crudeness you have right now. You want to sensitize yourself more and more to what's really going on. There's an awful lot going on in the present moment. You might be sitting here with the breath, and it doesn't seem like much is happening, but that's simply because your level of sensitivity isn't refined enough. Look more carefully. Watch to see how the level of stress in the mind arises and falls. When it falls, what did you just stop doing? When it rises, what were you starting to do? Try to catch yourself right there.

In one way, you're not going anywhere at all, you're staying right here. But you're seeing more right here. What's right here begins to open up.

So accept the fact that you're going to stay here, but that you're not going to stay here with the same level of crudeness you're bringing to right now. There are good qualities to develop. You've got the potential, and it would be a shame not to develop that potential. So accept the fact that you've got some work to do, because it's through the work that the meditation becomes special. As the Buddha said, ultimately you get to the point where you see things you've never seen before, realizing things you've never realized before. That requires that you be observant to a level you've never been observant before. So accept that you've got some duties in the meditation and do your best to see them through.