

Strategic Friends

August 22, 2009

Gather your attention right here at the breath. Take a couple of good long, deep breaths and see where you notice the sensation of breathing most strongly. It could be at the nose, could be at the chest, the abdomen, shoulders, wherever the sensation tells you very clearly that now the breath is coming in, now the breath is going out. Then allow the breath to find a rhythm that feels good right there. Sometimes you may feel the need to be energized; other times you may need to relax. This is why you have to learn how to read your meditation. After all, that's what the meditation is all about: learning to read the mind.

But the mind is very subtle. As the Buddha says, it's so quick to change that there's nothing you can compare it to. There's nothing anywhere near as quick as the mind to change direction. By time you've noticed that it seems to be one way, it's already something else.

So to get practice in watching what's going on in the present moment, watch the breath first. Even though the breath may be subtle, it's not anywhere near as subtle as the mind. It gives you good practice in learning how to read what's going on in the present moment. You get a sense of what kind of breath energy your body needs, and how you can breathe in a way that meets that need. That's a lot to explore right there.

Sometimes, as you get more sensitive to the breathing, you find there are patterns of tension, big blocks of blockage here and there in the body. There may be parts of the body that seem to be missing. Like your shoulder: You have a clear sense of your hands, and a clear sense of the chest, but in between your chest and your hand, things seem to be missing. Well, first notice those areas of the body and try to work around them, in the areas that are clear, the areas that allow the breath to flow freely. Focus your attention there. You're trying to create a sense of well-being.

There's the story of the Buddha's quest for awakening. He had been practicing austerities, trying to deny himself any kind of pleasure at all for six years, trying to stop his breath, trying to go without as much food as possible to the point where he was so emaciated that he would fall down every time he tried to urinate or defecate. He touched his belly and he could feel his spine. When he realized that that wasn't the way out, he tried to figure out: Is there another way out?

He thought of the pleasure he felt one time as a young child—sitting under a tree while his father was plowing—as his mind naturally entered into a state of

concentration, a sense of rapture and pleasure or refreshment and pleasure that came from the fact that his mind is not involved in any unskillful mental states at all, just sitting there with a sense of seclusion. So he asked himself: Could this be the way to awakening? The response that came from his mind was Yes. He asked himself, “Why I’m afraid of that pleasure? It’s not blameworthy.” You’re not exploiting anyone else. You’re not harming anyone else. You’re not intoxicating the mind. It’s not blameworthy. It has nothing to do with sensual pleasures or desires for sensuality.

So he decided he wouldn’t be afraid of that pleasure. He’d been avoiding pleasure for six years. When he was able to allow himself that pleasure, then his mind is able to settle down. That became the primary factor in the path to awakening.

So even though we may have the impression that the Buddha talks a lot about suffering, that’s not all he talks about. He also talks about the pleasure, the rapture, that can get quite intense as you follow the path. Notice where in the body there’s a feeling of fullness. It might feel as if the breath is filling the breath channels there, and the blood is filling the blood vessels. It feels nice. It’s not disturbed by the in-breath, not disturbed by the out-breath. You might notice that sensation someplace in your hands or in your chest, at the point of the sternum, which is a little breastbone that sticks out between your ribs right in the middle of the chest. Anywhere you have that sense of fullness, allow it to stay there. Make sure that the way you breathe doesn’t disturb it.

Then allow it to spread. Think of it seeping out in any direction, every direction that it can. Then tend to it. Look after it—because there’s nourishment there. The energy in the body feels good. The mind can find a sense of ease and well-being. In some cases, there’s even a sense of overflowing with ease and well-being. Again, tend to that. Look after it. Don’t squeeze it. Don’t throw it away.

A lot of the concentration practice is just this: finding little potentials for well-being, little potentials for the mind to settle down, and learning how to tend to them, not just dismissing them because they’re not as dramatic as you might have imagined concentration to be. Big things grow from little things. Trees can grow from very tiny seeds. If you step on the seeds, the trees can’t grow.

So try to find whatever little seeds of pleasure, seeds of fullness or refreshment you can find in the body, in the breath, and protect them. That way, you’re taking advantage of the potentials already here.

This is a large part of the practice: looking at what you’ve actually got, the things that you tend to overlook, and learning how to make the most of them. For instance, while we’re doing this, we’re developing some important qualities of

mind. There's mindfulness, which is the ability to keep something in mind—as when you're keeping the breath in mind right now. Then there's alertness, the ability to notice what's actually going on: what you're doing, the results of what you're doing. You breathe in a certain way: Does it feel good? If it doesn't, you can change. Experiment.

Mindfulness and alertness are very normal qualities of mind. We use them all day in all our different activities. They might not seem all that special. But the Buddha was able to take these simple qualities and do some radical things with them, first by strengthening them: How strong can your mindfulness be? How long can you keep something in mind? How long can you keep the breath in mind without dropping it? Try and see. If you find yourself slipping off, well, start all over again and see if you can stay longer the next time.

You begin to see that, as you do this, you run into all kinds of little stray thoughts that could have overtaken you and kidnapped the mind, throwing a sack over it and carrying it off, so that you find yourself thinking about something 50 miles away. But if you're really mindful, you catch these things quickly, so you realize: "I could go with that thought if I wanted to, but I don't. So I'm not going to do that." In that way, you've strengthened your mindfulness.

Each time a little thought comes up like that, maintain your determination to stay here with the breath, to keep the breath in mind, and not take advantage of the opportunity to stop off and have a drink someplace or visit with some friends, or just daydream. There's work to be done here.

As you strengthen the mind in this way, you find that the mind gets more and more resilient.

Of course, just to maintain that mindfulness, alertness has to be protected it as well, so you can detect what's coming up, what's going to destroy your mindfulness, and how you can make sure you don't get kidnapped. You can get to the point where when there's even the slightest little disturbance, you detect it quickly and can dispatch it. Or if you see that the mind is beginning to loosen its grip a little bit and is getting tired of doing this, wants to do something else, well, focus back in on the breath. How can you make the breath really, really comfortable in a way that you haven't done before, so that you can keep your interest up?

As you do this, you begin to see how mindfulness and alertness really do make a difference when you strengthen them. Then you can take that strengthened mindfulness and alertness, and use them in all kinds of different ways. Use them here in your meditation. You can use them in activities in daily life. You find that you get more accomplished. When you couple that with discernment, which is

the ability to see cause and effect, and figure out which effects are things you want, which ones are not, which causes are skillful and which ones are not, you find you can really take your life in hand. So you start doing the things that lead to the results you want more and more.

This way, you get a sense of the importance of training the mind. It makes a huge difference if you develop these qualities. If you train the mind—perhaps using the term *mind* is too amorphous. What is this mind that you're training? Think of it more in terms of specific qualities. You're developing mindfulness. You're developing alertness, developing discernment, concentration, and goodwill for yourself. You really are concerned for your true happiness. You don't treat yourself as a throwaway person. You take your desire for true happiness seriously.

Then you begin to notice that certain activities would be skillful but you don't like them. Others are unskillful but you do like them. What are you going to do there? You have to develop discernment of a slightly different kind, a more strategic kind, learning how to fend off whatever reasons the mind has for liking and disliking things. Because even when the mind is wrongheaded, it has its reasons, wrongheaded reasons. It's not just a matter feeling that you want to do this, or feeling you want to do that. You have your reasons for feeling those things, but often because the reasons are so bad, they hide behind the feeling. Yet if you're more mindful and alert, you can begin to ferret them out. You can stand in the way of your unskillful thoughts, your unskillful reasons, so that you find yourself really doing skillful things and really avoiding unskillful things.

So we start with the breath, but we move into the mind. The breath gives you a sense of well-being and sharpens your awareness of the present moment, a sense of well-being that allows you to resist a lot of your old temptations. Many of those temptations are just the desire for a quick fix. You say, "I don't need a quick fix. I've got some nice pleasure going right here, a sense of fullness in the heart, a sense of fullness in the chest, a fullness in the different parts of the body that feels really nourishing. So why would I want to go out and destroy that by doing something unskillful?"

So there are strategies to this training. You develop the breath as your friend. You develop skillful qualities in the mind as your friends, so that they can help you in your fight against your unskillful qualities, your unskillful desires. You come to see more and more clearly that when the Buddha was talking about suffering and stress, it wasn't because he was pessimistic. It was because he had a way out. He found that the ways you used to make yourself suffer can fall by the wayside. You look at them clearly, and you really don't want to go there anymore—because you realize you've got something better.

So tend to the mind. Tend to the breath. Tend to all the skillful qualities you need. Give them a chance to grow, and you'll find that they can do a lot of things you might not have imagined. They can take you to a happiness that nothing else can compare with it at all.