

## *As Days & Nights Fly Past*

*January 1, 2010*

Try to get the body in a comfortable position. Try to keep your back straight—but not ramrod straight. Comfortably straight. Face forward. Close your eyes. Put your hands in your lap, your right hand on top of your left. And there you are.

The next step is to put the mind in a comfortable position, and that takes more time.

First start with thoughts that are comfortable to think. “May I be happy, may all living beings be happy,” as in the chant we chanted just now. That’s a comfortable thought to think. And think about the possibility of a true happiness: a happiness that doesn’t harm you, doesn’t harm anybody else, because it comes from within. Those are good thoughts to think as well. True happiness is possible and it doesn’t have to harm anyone—unlike most of the pleasures of the world, where if someone gains something, somebody else has to lose. And not just lose: Some people actually are harmed by other people’s search for happiness. But here’s a search for happiness where nobody gets harmed.

Where do you find that happiness? You find it within.

So the next step is to focus on your breath, because the breath is a good anchor for keeping the mind in the present. It’s also what makes the present livable in terms of getting the mind to settle comfortably into the body in the present moment. The breath is the part of the body that’s most changeable and lies most under your control. It can have an effect on whether you’re going to be sitting here in pain or sitting here in pleasure.

Take a couple of good long deep in-and-out breaths. See how that feels. If it feels good, keep it up; if not, you can change to shorter breathing or longer breathing. Heavier or lighter; deeper or more shallow; faster or slower; broader or more focused. There are lots of different ways you can breathe. Experiment to see what the range of breathing can do for the body.

It’s like getting a new stereo. You fiddle with the dials to see how they affect the sound, what kind of noises you can get out of your stereo. Then you finally decide on the settings you prefer. And you can do the same with the breath. Nobody’s here to tell you that one way of breathing has to be better than another. You get to choose. And in choosing, you develop your own powers of discernment. As you begin to see that some ways of breathing feel good for a while but after a while they don’t feel so good, well, you get to change. You try other ways.

You also notice how you think about the breath. What kind of concept do you use to picture the breathing process to yourself? When you breathe in, what’s actually happening? You know there’s air coming in and out of the lungs, but as you begin to get more sensitive to how you experience the process, you begin to see there’s also a sense of energy that flows through the body. And that has a huge impact on how you’re going to be sitting here for the rest of the hour. If the energy is allowed to flow smoothly and freely, you’re more likely to be here with a sense of comfort. In fact, when the Buddha talks about the mind settling in, it’s to develop pleasure and rapture. It’s right here, in the way the breath energy flows, that the pleasure and the rapture are going to appear. So you work with that.

Once you find a sense of ease, what can you do to maintain that ease? You can’t clamp down on it. But you can’t take a cavalier attitude toward it, either. It’s something you want to protect. You have to be very observant as to how you’re experiencing the body in the present moment and to what ways you can experiment with that experience. Notice which ways of breathing create a sense of ease; which ways of breathing destroy that sense of ease; which ways of breathing, which ways of focusing on the breath energy, help to maintain a sense of ease and allow it to grow to a sense of fullness, so that you feel full, full, full, all the

way through the in-breath and all the way through the out. Don't try to squeeze the energy out as you breathe out, because that prevents the sense of fullness and rapture from arising.

So, this allows us to sit here, the body comfortably in position, the mind comfortably in position. And that in and of itself can be healing: healing to the body, healing to the mind. Learn how to maintain that.

But it's more than just healing. As we all know, there's another side to the meditation, which is gaining insight. Maintaining the sense of comfort is actually what makes the insight possible. Why is that? Because a lot of the issues that we're going to try to gain insight into are not very comfortable to think about. Normally we approach them with a sense of desperation, fear, and anxiety, and so we can't really see them for what they are.

Like that chant we had just now: aging, illness, death, separation. These are things we don't like to think about. Most people take an ostrich attitude toward them: that if you bury your head in the sand, they won't see you and they'll go away. But that obviously doesn't work. The body grows old, even as you're sitting there. It grows sick. All those germs come floating to you through the air. And, of course, the body's going to die someday. This is something we all know. Death is one of the things that's totally certain and yet most of us act as if it's not going to happen—because we don't know how to think about it. We can't approach it with a sense of comfort, so we try to avoid it. But what the Buddha's having us do as we meditate is to develop a sense of comfort in body and mind so that you can look at these things from a balanced and unthreatened perspective.

Even though they're inevitable, and potentially very painful, you don't have to suffer from them. That's an important point. For most of us, just the idea of aging, illness, and death causes us to suffer. Even more so, the actuality: As you grow old, you find there are things you can't do anymore. Your body simply won't let you. When you're sick, you're even more debilitated. And when you die, the body doesn't come and say, "I'm going to die on such and such a date. Get everything ready in time. Is this a convenient time to go? If not, we can negotiate." It doesn't discuss that at all. If it's going to go, it's going to go.

The question is, how do you learn not to suffer from those things? And the answer is that you develop qualities of mind, and you also develop a certain attitude toward life. This is crucial. You need to gain a sense of what's really important in this limited span of time that we have when the body's still healthy, still relatively young, still functioning—at least to some extent—and still alive. What's really worth doing in this life?

There's a question the Buddha has the monks reflect on every day and it's not just for monks. It's for everybody who practices. It's: "What am I becoming as days and nights fly past?" This is a question he has you ask yourself every day: "What am I becoming as days and nights fly past?" It's an interesting question. We all know about the teachings on not-self and going beyond becoming, but here the Buddha's asking you to reflect on yourself and what your self is becoming. This is because there are areas in the practice where it is useful to develop a healthy sense of self, a skillful sense of self. This reflection is meant to develop that skillful sense of self through heedfulness, because all skillful qualities in mind come from being heedful.

For a lot of people, as days and nights fly past, all they can think about is, "How can I cram in as many pleasures and memories as possible? I want to make sure I'm not missing out on anything." Of course, when you do one thing, you're missing out on something else. Like packing a suitcase: The more you cram in, the more other things are going to spill out. If you take the attitude that the value of life lies in having lots of memories, well, we all know what the process of memory is like. We stash away certain ideas, and as they get brought up from the mind to reflect on, each time you put them back in the mind they get changed. After a while your memories get distorted and deformed. So what's left? A lot of lies the mind is telling itself about the past. They may look like gold, but they're fake.

Years back, in 1997, I went to Alaska, and then I went back again in 2005. And even allowing for the fact that things do change, still I found that many of my memories from 1997 were impossible. Things I'd remembered from my first trip just couldn't have been that way, in terms of sites I had seen, places I had noticed, details that had struck me before. I went back and realized they couldn't have happened. And so you begin to wonder about devoting your life to gathering up memories. After a while, the memories are totally

worthless.

So the Buddha doesn't have you reflect on, "What am I gathering up as days and nights fly past?" but, "What am I becoming?" What kind of person are you becoming? What qualities of mind are you developing? Are you developing laziness? Are you developing complacency? Or are you developing heedfulness? Are you developing mindfulness? Because as the Buddha said, the things we tend to think about form an inclination for the mind—or as we would say, ruts for the mind: ways in which you tend to act, ways in which you tend to think, that as you keep repeating them become harder and harder to leave.

Each time you go over the same pattern, you're creating a deeper and deeper rut in the mind. Do you like the ruts you've been creating for yourself? Do you like the way you tend to act? This is important. They talk about people who lose their memory as they get older, but many of their personality traits are still there. If you've been developing kindness, compassion, and mindfulness, then even when your memories are gone, you'll still have something valuable. But if you've been developing your irritability, if you've been developing anger or selfishness, then those are the qualities you'll be left with. Do they have any value? Are they worth packing up and taking with you as you move on?

In Thailand, I knew a number of meditators who had gone through brain damage, either through an accident or through surgery. One of them, one of Ajaan Fuang's students, had been through an operation on his heart. Apparently the doctors had clamped off the wrong arteries during the operation, and when he came out of the operation he realized that his brain wasn't functioning the way it had been before. But he'd been developing the mindfulness and alertness through his meditation that enabled him to handle the slow recovery with a lot more skill and grace than most people would.

So are you developing the mental skills you're going to need as the body begins to malfunction? Or are you developing mental attitudes and habits that will make things worse? This is important to reflect on. It gives you a handle on how best to approach aging, illness, and death. There are things you can do in preparation.

One of the reasons most people don't like to think about these things is because they feel there's nothing they can do to prepare. When illness comes, we have to give the body over to the doctors. The doctors will take care of the problem—sometimes. As for death, well, death just happens. You can't really do anything about it. You can't prepare, so you might as well not think about it. That's what many people think, but it's not the case at all. You *can* prepare. There's a skillful way to die, and there are many, many unskillful ways to die. They all depend on the mental qualities you've developed and what you've been becoming.

This is one aspect of the practice where it's useful to think in terms of who you are, what you're becoming. It's a skillful use of the sense of self. It's not the case that every time you have a sense of self it's going to cause you to suffer. Some ways of thinking about yourself are actually part of the path. Toward the end of the path, you won't be needing them anymore. But when you're choosing what to do, you need a strong sense of what's worth doing and what's not—what you'll be benefitting from down the line, what you'll be suffering from down the line, depending on what you're doing right now. The heedful sense of self is well worth protecting because it keeps your actions in line, gives you a sense of priorities. It encourages you to stay on the skillful path.

These distinctions are important. It's not the case that non-duality is where we're headed or what we want to develop along the path. We need to see distinctions, especially between what's skillful and what's not, because we're making choices and they have their impact. We can't simply go on the idea that, "Well, my motivation is compassionate, therefore everything I do out of my compassionate motivation is going to be skillful." That doesn't work at all.

You have to educate your compassion. There are times when something seems to be compassionate right now, but as you begin to look down the line, you realize it's not the right or wise or even kind thing to do.

This requires that you be careful, that you notice what's happening. And if, as days and nights fly past, you begin to detect signs of complacency, you can do something about it. If you begin to see signs of

mindlessness, try to develop mindfulness instead. You've got to keep watch on these things. After all, with the passage of time, as we get older, we can develop more and more abilities for a while, but then there comes a point where the body begins to reverse direction. You lose abilities. You lose strength. For a while you can make a difference by exercising and looking after your diet, but they've done studies to show that there's a certain point, as you get older, that exercise doesn't make any difference anymore. The body's just going to decay, regardless. Some forms of exercise that used to strengthen the body actually become bad for it. So you have to be very careful, while at the same time realizing that your true wealth lies in the mind. Are you stashing wealth into the mind? Or are you squandering your mental wealth and replacing it with sand and broken feathers? Are you trading candy for gold? Or gold for candy?

There's that story in the Canon of a village that suddenly had to be evacuated, so the villagers fled, leaving many of their belongings behind. After a while, two men from a nearby village said, "Let's go check out this village and see what was left behind. Maybe there's something valuable." They went through the houses and found some flax plants that had been harvested and were being prepared to make linen. Because these flax plants had some value, the men tied them up in bundles and loaded them on their shoulders. But as they went on, they found linen thread. And one man said, "This is what we wanted the flax plants for anyhow, so let's throw away the flax plants and take up the linen thread instead." The second man said, "No, I wrapped up my flax plants really nicely. I don't want to let go of them." So the first man threw away his flax plants and took the linen thread, while the second one kept his flax plants. They went along a little further and they found linen cloth. The same thing happened. The first man threw away his linen thread to load up on the linen cloth, but the second one kept his nicely wrapped flax plants. After the linen cloth, they found things of greater and greater value until they finally ran across copper, silver, and gold. So when they were finished, the second man returned from the village with nothing but the flax plants he wrapped up so nicely, whereas the first one came back with a whole load of gold.

The wife of the second man was pretty upset. The wife of the first man was very happy, because he knew what to throw away and knew what to keep.

So you have to ask yourself: Do you know what to throw away? Do you know what to keep? What are you gathering up? Are you gathering up just memories? Or are you gathering up skills? The skills are gold. The memories are flax plants. The gold is going to be helpful as the inevitable happens—as the body grows ill, as it ages, as it begins to lose its functions and finally dies. The qualities of the mind you've been developing are going to be your gold.

So what habits are you gathering up as days and nights fly past? That's what you're becoming as days and nights fly past. This is one of the reasons why we try to get the mind into a state of comfort and ease, so that we can think about these things clearly, helpfully—so that we'll recognize gold when we see it. And we'll know how to get the most out of it.