

Sober Up

January 30, 2011

In English, when we talk about getting the mind to stay focused on something, we talk about its “settling down.” And in one way that’s right. The mind tends to be flying around all over the place. If it can focus on one object, it’s like a flock of birds who finally settle down on one spot, all gathered together.

In Thai, though, they have another idiom: They talk about lifting the mind up above its ordinary preoccupations.

So you can think of the mind either going up or down, whichever seems to describe how it feels to you as the mind settles in with the breath and you drop all your other concerns.

For the time being, you don’t want to be interested in anything else—just interested in the breath. Take a couple of good, long, deep in-and-out breaths, and see how it feels. If it feels good, keep it up. The question may arise: Where should it feel good? For instance, it may feel good in the rib cage, but not so good in the shoulders. As you breathe in, there may be a tightness in the head. Well, see if you can find a way of breathing that feels good all over. Relax all the muscles in the head, in the shoulders, down through the torso, and try to keep them relaxed all the way through the in-breath, all the way through the out.

You’re studying the process of breathing here. And you realize that if the breath feels good in the body, it’s going to be good for the different organs of the body. After all, the breath is the energy that keeps everything going. Without it, the body would die. The organs would stop functioning. So it’s one kind of food for the body. And as with any other kind of food, you can fix it well or fix it poorly. You can feed the body well or you can feed it poison. So let’s feed it good food: breathing that feels good, a good energy that flows all throughout the body.

If you take an interest in the breath, it helps you put aside your interest in other things. This is where it’s important to think of this as lifting the mind up. Most of our other interests pull us down. We have our passions for sights, sounds, smells, tastes, and tactile sensations, and we think that these things are what give spice and interest to life. But they also tie us down. They get us intoxicated so that we don’t see things clearly. So we need something better: a pleasure that, instead of pulling us down, lifts us up, gives us some freedom, gives us some clarity of mind.

And even though there may be some desire in doing the practice, there may be some clinging to the comfortable sensations that come, that’s a healthy desire,

that's even a healthy clinging. There will come a point in the practice where you let it go, but you shouldn't let it go too quickly. Use it as you find it. It's helpful to keep you with the breath.

And as for the distractions that come along, you have to remind yourself that they can get you drunk. The Buddha talks about different kinds of intoxication. There's intoxication with youth, intoxication with health, intoxication with life: Those are the three big ones. Then there's intoxication with sights, sounds, smells, tastes, tactile sensations, all the things we crave. And, of course, when you're intoxicated by these things, you end up doing crazy things, stupid things, unskillful things. That's what ties us down.

We like to think of our pleasures as not having any price. But they do carry a big price. This is why the Buddha has us reflect every day: What do you have that's really yours? You can gain pleasures, and then they leave you. You're subject to aging, illness, and death, separation from all things you love, and so is everybody else. The Buddha has you reflect on that. It sounds depressing, but then there's the fifth reflection: We are the owners of our actions. This is something we do have, these are things we do carry with us: the results of past actions and habits that shape the actions we keep doing in the present moment. Those are our real possessions.

So when you think about a particular pleasure, think about: What are the actions that go into gaining the pleasure? To holding onto the pleasure? What do you do when you lose the pleasure? Because the pleasures don't last. Ajaan Suwat used to like to ask, "Where are yesterday's sensual pleasures?" Can you pull them up and savor them again? All you have are memories, and we know about memories. They get distorted, and the memory of a past pleasure is not necessarily a pleasant thing. So these things simply don't last, and they can turn on you. All you've really got are the results of your actions.

The Buddha says that as you reflect on that, it helps you to abandon unskillful actions and to develop skillful ones in their place. Then he has you go on to reflect that it's not just you. Everybody, wherever you go, and wherever you could go, wherever you could be reborn, any level of the universe: Everybody is still subject to aging, illness, death, and separation, and they all have their actions. This, he says, is enough to motivate you to want to get out. Because it's so easy, under the influence of pleasure, to do unskillful things. You work hard to do what is skillful, and then there are pleasant things that come about as a result, and then you fall for the pleasant things. You forget about the fact that your old actions are what got you there, and that your new actions will shape where you're going.

So these are important things to think about as you're trying to get the mind into the present moment. You realize that if you wander off, it's like getting drunk. Ajaan Lee talks about meditators as being like drunks, weaving back-and-forth across the road, and then falling over in a stupor. In other words, you don't really stay with your object of meditation. You're still thinking about the things you like to do, things you'd like to experience, things you'd like to see, hear, taste, touch, and smell. That's got you weaving down the path already. And then you leave the meditation object entirely. That's like falling over in a stupor on the side of the road.

Ajaan Fuang once said to notice the pleasures that you really would like to experience, things that the mind tends to feed on. He says the fact that you're so obsessed with them is a sign that you had them in the past—and you miss them now. Just think about that for a few seconds. It's enough to make you want to get out of the whole process. Because, after all, if you had them once in the past, you probably had them before that, and you had them before that, and you kept missing them after you lost them. And you get them again, and you lose them again. It doesn't accomplish anything at all. Whereas the path here can lift your mind up to a higher level. The pleasure that comes with just being with the breath, the Buddha said, is a higher level of pleasure. It's also a level of pleasure that clarifies the mind. When the mind is steadily in the present moment, that's when discernment can arise.

So the pleasure of the breath as you work with it is not just an inducement to help you stay with the breath. It's an important part of taking you further on the path. It gives you something to feed on while you're following the path, so that you don't go hungering after food that would be off the path. You don't get poisoned. It's interesting, the word for intoxication in Thai—*mao*—can also mean that you're poisoned by something. The pleasures that we go for in the course of the day are like poison. They have a really bad effect on the mind because they make you do unskillful things. That's why the Buddha gives you good food for the path here so that you don't go searching for poison off in the brush.

So try to take an interest in the breath. Notice how it feels in the different parts of the body. If any parts of the body tend to be in pain, you might want to think of the breath energy soothing those parts, comforting those parts. The areas in the body where things seem to be blocked off: Think of the blockage opening up. Sometimes you'll notice, as you begin to make a survey of the different parts of the body, that certain parts seem to be missing. You may feel like you don't have a shoulder. If you open your eyes and look, of course it's there, but feeling from the inside, it seems that it's not there. In that case, try to locate where you feel your

hand—again, from the inside. And how about the torso? Then work your way up from the hand, and up from the torso, and see where things connect. Give the breath new places to flow so that it's soothing both for the body and for the mind, healing both for the body and for the mind. Because when you see that it's good for both your body and mind, you're more likely to get interested in it. You're not so attracted to other things right now. You've got this new skill to master, this new area to explore.

So don't let those old poisoned mushrooms attract you. Learn to see your distractions just as that: "This is poison, it's going to intoxicate you, it might kill you, kill your goodness." At the very least, it gets you all bleary headed and you come out of the meditation not having profited at all. And not just with the meditation: As you go through life, you have to watch out for these attractive things that pull you in. Like poisonous mushrooms: They're the prettiest mushrooms around, but that doesn't mean they're good for you.

So try to clear your head here with some good breathing and sober up. As you learn how to use the breath to help the different organs of the body, you also give the mind a good place to stay in the present moment, where it can see things clearly, see its intentions and the results of its intentions clearly.

And that's the beginning of real discernment right there. We tend to think of Buddhist wisdom as dealing with very abstruse abstractions, but it really starts with this insight into "What are you doing?" "What are the results?" All the teachings on emptiness, not-self, universal compassion: They all come down to this question: What kind of action is this? Is it a good action? If not, what can you do to replace it with a better one?

And how do you know if it's a good action? You look at the results. Some actions fill the mind with confusion; other actions empty the mind of its confusions; some habits are worth holding onto; some habits are not. This is how the teaching on action gradually develops into teachings on emptiness, not-self, and all the other more advanced teachings. But they start right here and they never really leave this principle of: What are you doing? What are the results? And how can you see that clearly? What states of mind can you develop? What states of mind do you have to let go of so that you can really understand all the implications of your actions?

The breath is where you start.