

For the Survival of Your Goodness

June 20, 2011

Try to notice what way of breathing seems most refreshing. Notice where in the body you're most sensitive to how the breathing has an impact on your feelings. These sensations may be around the heart, in the throat, in the middle of the head. Where are you most sensitive to the impact of the breath? And what way of breathing feels most soothing, refreshing, and nourishing right there? Stay with that spot in the body for a while and let it be healed, let it be strengthened. Because having a sense of well-being that you can tap into whenever you need it is essential to your survival, i.e., the survival of the goodness of your mind.

When the Buddha says that heedlessness is the path to death, he's not talking just about physical death. He's talking about the death of the mind's good qualities, its inner strengths. These are your most important treasures because they determine, on the one hand, what you're going to do, how you're going to act, how you're going to speak, how you're going to think; and those things, of course, have a huge impact on your life, now and on into the future. They can even leap over the fact of death and go on into the next life. That's how far their impact can extend. In fact, not just one next lifetime: sometimes many next lifetimes. Your actions are that important.

So make sure you have the strengths you need in order to maintain the desire to be skillful. Because the world can tear away at that very easily if you're out looking for your nourishment in the world.

That's the other reason we try to find nourishment inside, because the more independent we are here, the less we open ourselves up to the attacks of the world. Just the fact of being subject to sensory input, the Buddha says, is like being eaten at, like a cow whose skin has been flayed is being eaten at by insects all the time. Even worse than that is when we go out and try to feed on these things. And, of course, the more you feed on things outside the mind, the more you're opening yourself to outside influences, good and bad. And when you're really hungry, you tend to get pretty indiscriminate.

So as you feed yourself with a sense of well-being inside that comes both from the inner sense of physical well-being that you can maintain with the breath, and the mental well-being that comes as your mindfulness, alertness, concentration, and discernment get stronger, your food-source gets more secure. You find yourself taking less and less from the world, and having more and more to give. It's not like we're shutting ourselves off on a little island, refusing to have any contact

with anybody else. That's not what the practice is all about. The practice is developing the mind so that you benefit and the people around you benefit, too.

So try to maintain this sense of inner strength, inner well-being, so that you can deal with whatever comes up, and not get wasted away by it, not get drained by it, and not expose yourself to the influences of the world. After all, the values of the world are all very strange. Someone once noted: All the people in the human race know they're going to die, and yet they act as if they didn't know: scrambling after this, that, and the other thing, trying to defend what little they have. And yet it's all going to slip away from their grasp.

And they want other people to see things the way they do. Ajaan Fuang once noted that this doesn't apply just to human beings. There are even devas out there who are a little scared by people who practice meditation, who practice the Dharma for freedom. It calls into question what they're doing. And a lot of people don't like to have that called into question.

So we maintain our own inner stability. In a way, being a meditator is like being a turtle. The turtle has a very, very tender body, which is why it needs its hard shell. You maintain the tenderness of a very sensitive mind inside, but you need to have the shell that comes when you're not feeding on things outside.

I was once teaching at a retreat, and one of the retreatants to come up after a couple of days and said, "You know, I came back from last night's session and I realized I was really angry at you." And I said, "Oh? Why?" And he said: "Well, I've been thinking about it. Ever since you came here, I haven't been able to figure out where your buttons are." So I made light of it and said, "That's why we wear robes, so that you can't see our buttons."

But the issue goes deeper than that. If you're a meditator, people try to push your buttons, and they find they can't push the buttons. Some of them really don't like that. Which means, of course, that they're trying to control you, and are frustrated by the lack of control. But if you can be button-free in this way, that's how you can survive in this world—how your goodness can survive: the goodness that nourishes you from within, and the goodness you have to offer to others.

So it's not a selfish practice, and it's not an unfeeling or hardhearted practice. It's simply a very practical, clear-eyed approach to what you have to do in order to maintain the most precious things you have—the good qualities in the mind—in the face of everything and everybody that would try to drain them or strip them away.

So try to find this center that feels really, really good. This is how you can maintain mindfulness and alertness throughout the day. Because if it's just something that you tell yourself you should do and it's not pleasant, the mind is

going to find all kinds of reasons for wandering off, slipping away when you're not looking. But if you can maintain a sense of well-being, tap into it, keep it going, and allow it to do its work, both on the body and on the mind, you discover a strength that you didn't realize you had.

Now, there are times when the simple sense of well-being from the breath isn't enough, because there are bits and pieces of your attention that keep slipping off. In other words, you've got outside concerns that don't allow you to stay here really 100%. Sometimes it's useful then, at the beginning of the meditation, to remind yourself of the things you don't have to pay attention to. Consciously tell yourself, "I'm putting aside this and that responsibility." All the people and issues in life that tend to pull you out, and say to yourself, "For the time being, those issues are far away." And then be true to that determination. You know that at the end of the meditation you'll have to pick these things up again, but don't let them eat away at your awareness while you're here.

This practice of consciously reminding yourself of what you're not going to think about can help protect your space. Because as soon as you find your thoughts wandering off in that direction, you remind yourself, "Hey, remember I don't need to go there." Then you'll begin to notice how often your thoughts tend to wander in that direction. And it's no wonder that you feel frazzled by the end of the day if that's the case.

So you have to be especially careful with the things that tend to pull you away unthinkingly. And the best way to not be unthinking is to think about them at the beginning of the practice. Tell yourself: You're not going to think about your family, you're not going to think about your job, or whatever other responsibilities there may be. You'll just put them aside.

There was a woman who came to practice in the monastery one time in Thailand. She was going to stay for two weeks, but toward the end of the second day, she came to say goodbye to Ajaan Fuang. She was going to go home. And he asked her why. She said, "I'm worried about the people at home, what they're going to do without me: how they're going to get along, what they're going to eat, who's going to wash the clothes." He said to her, "Pretend that you've died. Tell yourself you're dead now. You can't go back. They're sure to be able to look after themselves without you." She did, and she was able to stay on for the whole two weeks. Sometimes it's good to have a knife like that to cut through your thoughts.

Of course, you have to be able to do this not only when you're away from home, but also when you're right in the midst of the house and all the affairs of the house. It's almost as if your nervous system were plugged into the electric wires in the house: Everything in the house is connected to you. So you have to

unplug. This goes for family, it goes for work, all the other things that tend to pull you out and insist that you have to look after them right now. You say, “No, not right now. At the end of the session.” Give the mind its own space so that it really can benefit from being right here at the most sensitive spots in the body, where the breath is doing its healing work. As you let go of those other responsibilities, have a little touch of goodwill, so it’s not an angry rejection. It’s simply: “Okay, goodwill for you, but in order to deal with you effectively, I’m going to need some time on my own. So goodwill for everybody,” and then pull the plug.

Think of the meditation as food, medicine, shelter for the mind, and give it the care it needs. And then learn how to take some of that sense of nourishment around with you as you go through the day, so that you can keep in touch with it, tap into it when you need it, and not just feed on the leftover food from your meditation session. Learn how to produce that sense of well-being as you move through the day, and you’ll find that the goodness of the mind—all the good qualities that you need for yourself and for others—will stay nourished and won’t dry up.

It’s in this way that your practice becomes *akālika*, timeless, where you don’t just shut it off into a few minutes here, a few minutes there. Every time throughout the day becomes a time to nourish the mind, keep it nourished, keep it strong, keep it well centered, well established. This is how you take care of your most precious resources and allow them to grow.