

## *Past & Future in the Present*

*October 15, 2011*

Close your eyes and make up your mind that you're going to stay with the breath for the rest of the hour. Watch the breath as it's coming in, and watch it as it's going out. And remember to stay here. It's very easy to forget.

You're basically doing three things. You make the intention to stay, which is your intention moving into the future, and then you watch what's actually happening right here and right now. How does the breath feel? Where do you feel it when you breathe in? Take a couple of good, long, deep in-and-out breaths to begin with. Notice *where* you feel the breath and *how* it feels. Does it feel comfortable? Or is it too long, too short, too heavy, too light, too fast, too slow? You can make adjustments if you want. In fact, it's important that you do make adjustments. Otherwise it's very easy to get tired of the breath, bored with the breath, and your mind will begin to want to go someplace else.

That's two things right there: first, wanting to stay here; and second, actually watching what's going on here, being attentive and alert. The third part is to remember that you made that intention. You set out that intention to stay here, and you want to stay here. You also want to remember any good lessons you've learned from the past. If you've meditated before, how did you get the mind to settle down? What worked? What didn't work? Okay, remember those things.

This is how we train the mind. It requires these three functions: your willing, which is your intention that moves into the future; your intention to stay here in the present; and your intention to be discerning.

One of the Thai ajaans, Ajaan Chah, talks about how discernment has to come from desire. If you don't really want to find true happiness, you can sit here and watch your breath for eons, and you're not going to get anywhere. So the desire is important. Your intention is important. And your *attention*, the quality of focusing on the present: That's important as well. You want to be really sensitive to how the breathing feels. So you put those two together. If you notice that the breath isn't feeling good, you realize that in a short time you're going to be wandering off someplace. So try to make it feel as comfortable as possible. This is how your desire to stay here actually helps you stay here.

All too often, desire gets out of control. You simply want the results, but you don't think about how you're going to gain them. Or you don't want to pay attention to how you gain them. In cases like that, the desire actually becomes an obstacle. But if you really pay attention to the present moment, you've got things to play with here. You can play with the length of the breath, how deep it goes, how heavy or light it is. These are things you can do in the present moment.

As for your memory of the past, that, too, can get in the way if you don't use it skillfully. If you think about how great some past meditation was, and the current meditation isn't nearly that good, you get depressed or anxious. That's a misuse of your memory. You want to be selective in what you remember. Remember that you made your intention to stay with the breath. Try to remember the things that worked: not so much how good things were in the past, but what *made* them good. That's something worth bringing with you into the present moment.

It's like you're travelling, and you have to carry your belongings in a knapsack. You don't want to carry too much. You don't want to carry things that will make it impossible for you to move forward. But you also want to carry enough to keep you going, like enough food. If you're going to spend the night out, you need a tent. You want to take along just what's needed.

So you're developing these three qualities: your will, your attention, and your memory. As you train them, the mind can settle down, more under your control. You have a greater sense of well-being because, as that chant stated just now, what do we have in life? We're going to be subject to aging, illness, and death, subject to separation. These aren't things we look forward to, but they're things we have to prepare for. And fortunately, we do have an out through our actions. That's what that fifth reflection is about: You can make a difference by the way you act. "Acting" here doesn't mean just acting with your body; it also means acting with your speech and especially with your mind. You can train yourself to act skillfully. You don't have to suffer.

What we're doing as we're meditating is learning a skill. We're using the same qualities of mind that you need in any manual skill. Suppose that you're playing the piano. On the one hand, you have an idea of what you want the piece to sound like: That's your will. And then you have to pay attention to what you're doing right now, how you're playing right now. Then you have to keep in mind what you've been playing because sometimes what you've been playing hasn't gone right in line with what you willed. So the question is: Do you want to bring it in line with what you originally willed? Or is what you've actually done heading toward a better trajectory?

This is the skillful way to bring your intentions for the future and your memories from the past to bear on the present moment. This is how the mind gets trained. You're developing qualities of ardency, alertness, and mindfulness—and these are qualities you're going to need in every aspect of life. Whatever the task— at school, at work, at home—you need to have these three qualities well developed if the task is going to go well.

We have to realize that happiness comes through our actions. It doesn't come just floating our way. It comes through the qualities we develop in the mind so that, regardless of what comes floating your way, you know what to do with it so that it doesn't create suffering. This is our big problem in life. We want happiness, but the way we handle our experiences causes

stress and suffering for the mind. We have to learn how to handle things in a new way so that regardless what comes— good, bad, or indifferent—we know how not to suffer.

So remember these three qualities you want to bring to the practice. The will that pushes you into the future, making plans for the future. You're planning to stay here with the breath, so you want to do it well. This is the quality that allows for discernment to arise. Then there's your attention to what you're actually doing —the results you're getting —along with your memory of any useful lessons that you may want to bring to bear when things either are going well or are not going so well. You remember what to do. You remember where to stay, where to stay focused, how to breathe.

You bring all these things together, and you train the mind so that instead of producing stress and suffering, it produces happiness. It knows how to give rise to well-being. That's the most important skill you can develop.