

Tranquility & Insight Together

March 19, 2014

Take a couple good long, deep in-and-out breaths. Notice where you feel the breathing. We're talking about that, the breathing *process*. Where do you feel that? Does it feel comfortable? Does it feel nourishing for the body? If it doesn't feel nourishing, you can change. You can try longer breathing or shorter, heavier or more shallow, deeper, lighter. Try to see what kind of breathing feels best for the body right now. And right there you've learned an important lesson: the extent to which you can shape your experience here in the present moment.

It's not that you're a passive observer just having to put up with whatever comes by. We're already shaping our experience—through the way we breathe, through the way we think about things, the perceptions we apply to things, the labels, the ideas we impose on our experience. These are all active processes. And as the Buddha said, we do these things out of ignorance for the most part, and as a result, even though we're looking for happiness or looking for pleasure, looking for well-being, we end up causing some stress and suffering—or actually quite a lot. If, however, you bring some knowledge to what you're doing—understanding where there's stress and what's causing it and what you can do to put an end to it—then the fabrication or the shaping of your experience turns into a good thing. It becomes what's called a path. It leads you ultimately to something that's not shaped at all, not fabricated at all. It's just there.

So when you're working with the breath, trying to get the mind into concentration, you're bringing some awareness to the way you fabricate the state of your mind and your experience of your body. When the breath starts feeling good, you can think of the breath flowing throughout the body. The whole nervous system ultimately gets involved in the breathing process, and the more you let it get involved, the greater sense of wholeness there is in the body, with the sense that everything's working together here, instead of at cross-purposes. You don't feel confined in the mind; even though it's focused in the present moment, it has a spacious sense of well-being here.

So you're trying to develop stillness and, at the same time, trying to develop some insight into what you're doing. Ideally, these two qualities work together. The stillness is called *samatha* or tranquility; the insight is called *vipassana*. And they have to work together.

Stillness is getting the mind to settle down, to be at home here in the present moment with a sense of ease and well-being. As the Buddha says, when you settle

down, you want to indulge in that sense of well-being, because the mind has a tendency to wander off in search of pleasure in other places. So you've got to give it something really good right here and to learn how to really appreciate the well-being that comes when the mind is settled down and doesn't have to keep jumping around all the time. Try to nurture a good, refreshing sense of energy in the body, particularly around the area of the torso. This is where some of our most sensitive parts of the body are—right down that middle line down the front of the torso. So allow that area to feel refreshed; be sensitive to how it feels and to what changes you need to make to the breathing to keep it feeling good.

Then you can indulge in it. You really have to appreciate this. In the beginning, it's an acquired taste, but as you get more and more used to it, you realize that this is where real well-being lies. You begin to see your other pleasures—pleasures of sights, sounds, smells, tactile sensations, other people, things, whatever—as involving a lot of wasted effort. If that's where you're feeding for pleasure, you're feeding in the wrong place. If you feed here, you're not harming anybody, you're not taking anything away from anyone else, and the sense of well-being goes deep down inside.

Sometimes, when you take meditation classes, you're told you have to watch out for concentration—you're going to get stuck on it if it gets really nice. But one of the Buddha's first realizations—in fact, the first factor of the path that he discovered—was right concentration. He realized that it was a pleasure not to be feared, both because it's not involved in sensuality and because it's blameless, i.e., it causes no harm. It's the kind of pleasure where the mind is still clear. It can see things clearly.

Now, the Buddha does note that it is possible, once you get into the concentration, that you may not want to move further on in the path. But that kind of attachment is a lot less destructive than the attachments we have for sights, sounds, smells, tactile sensations. I mean, people *kill* one another over material things. That's one of the reasons why there's killing and stealing and lying and illicit sex and intoxication—it's because we're stuck on sensual pleasures. And as the Buddha noted, the only way you're going to get over that attachment is to give the mind something better to hang on to—a greater pleasure, a deeper pleasure. That's what we're trying to provide with the concentration.

The only problem with concentration is that once you get there, you might get lazy and decide that it's good enough and not want to go any further. This is why you're encouraged—once the mind has settled down and you've gotten really good at the concentration—to start looking more deeply at it, with a lot more sensitivity. Where in that concentrated mind state is there still some stress? At

this point, it's hard to call it suffering, but there's a sense of disturbance, of being burdened a little bit. It's not much, but it's enough, if you're really sensitive. You can ask yourself, "Okay, what am I doing that's still creating that sense of being burdened?"

Here again, you look at it in terms of the breath, you look at it in terms of how you're thinking about things. Are you thinking too much about the breath, adjusting it too much? It is possible to get stuck on the idea that you have to keep improving the breath, improving the breath, every, every time. Actually, all you have to do is get it comfortable enough so that it feels good to settle down and you can stay there, just with the sense of breathing in the present. There's a sense of Oneness that can come when you drop all the excess thinking. Your awareness and the breath seem to be melded into one another.

There may still be a sense of rapture or strong sense of energy or refreshment, and after a while maybe that gets to be a little too much. How about tuning in to something more refined? You keep tuning in, tuning in, tuning in this way to detect more refined levels of stress and to notice what you're doing that's causing them. Then you can drop them.

The ability to see these things: That's the insight. You're looking in terms of how you're shaping your present moment. That's what the insight is all about. It's not saying, well, things arise and pass away, they're inconstant-stressful-and-not-self, and leaving it at that. First you want to say, "Well, what am I doing that's causing things to arise and pass away?" To what extent are your present intentions shaping things? And to what extent are they being shaped by the results of past intentions? The only way you're going to see these things is to experiment.

So what you're doing is trying to develop these qualities of tranquility and insight at the same time: tranquility for the sake of insight, and insight for the sake of tranquility. Kee Nanayon, who was a famous teacher in Thailand, a lay woman, once compared these two qualities to your two hands. They have to wash each other for both of them to be clean. You can't use your left hand to wash your left hand or your right hand to wash your right hand. You need your left hand to wash the right and the right hand to wash the left. In the same way, the tranquility makes it possible for you to see things going on clearly. You're not rushing around all the time. You're still. It's like the difference between running past a tree and standing still and watching the tree. When you're standing still, you see the details of the tree a lot more clearly.

But then again, the purpose of insight is getting the mind to even greater stillness, to get rid of even the slightest disturbances that you might be causing in the way you shape things. So these two qualities go together. It's not the case that

you do concentration for three days and then drop the concentration and then do nothing but insight. How are you going to gain any insight if you don't have a good, solid foundation? And what are you going to gain insight into? If you don't see the extent to which you're shaping things in a quiet mind, then the process of shaping goes underground. When it's underground, it's in ignorance and it's just going to cause more stress.

The purpose of all these instructions is to keep reminding you that you play an active role in shaping your experience, so you want to do it well, with awareness, with a clear understanding of what kinds of experiences should be abandoned, what kinds should be watched until you can comprehend them, and what kind should be developed even further. The ability to keep this in mind: That's what mindfulness really is. Sometimes we hear that mindfulness is simply being in the present moment, but there's no place at all that I've found where the Buddha says to just be with the present moment and that's it. You stay with the present moment and then you perform your duties there: You try to see the present clearly with insight. See it as something you've been shaping through your intentions, through the way you breathe, through the way you perceive things. And once you see those processes, then the next question is, how do you do this well?

Because your intentions are shaping your life, you've got a huge power in your hands and if you don't use it well, it's going to be used poorly. That's what ardency is all about. There's that famous verse where the Buddha talks about seeing the present moment clearly each time, each time, each time something comes up. But it's not just the seeing—you see it and then you realize, what can I do about this, to shape this more skillfully? That's where the ardency comes in.

So you take the breath—which is just coming in, going out, minding its own business—and you decide, "I'm going to make this into a path by sticking with it, by watching the processes in the mind that come together with sticking with the breath." That way you learn an awful lot about the mind. You see what kind of tools you use—the ones you're already using, but many times without even realizing it—and you bring them up into the light of day, so that you can use them more skillfully. Otherwise, you're using your tools with your eyes closed. If you used a wrench with your eyes closed, used a hammer with your eyes closed, you can imagine the kind of damage you'd do. Well, it's the same with the way we perceive things and think about things and not really notice what we're doing. We create a lot of suffering.

So open your eyes, look carefully, bring things into the light of the day. When you use a hammer, you want to hit the nail right on the head; when you use a saw,

you want to see precisely where things need to be sawed. When you think about things, think about things that are worth thinking about. If something's not worth thinking about, what can you do to disperse those thoughts? Those are some of the skills you learn as you meditate.

We've already got the tools, we're already using them, so we might as well learn how to use them with knowledge, clearly, aware of what we're doing, so that we can do the work well.