

Getting the Most Out of Now

November 14, 2018

So much of our suffering in life seems to come from events in the past, worries about the future, things done or said by other people, that sometimes it's hard to believe the Buddha when he says suffering comes from within, from what you're doing right now.

But as he points out, there are two kinds of suffering in the world: There's the suffering that comes from things outside and the fact that they're inconstant, undependable, stressful, and don't lie under your control as much as you'd like. But that really affects the mind only because of a second kind of suffering, which is the suffering that comes from clinging and craving. If the mind didn't have any clinging or craving, it wouldn't be a slave to things, as the chant said just now. Its happiness wouldn't have to depend on things outside going the way we wanted them to. It wouldn't have to suffer from the first kind of suffering.

It's because of this second, internal source that we practice meditation. We try to bring the mind into the present moment, and get into the here-and-now steadily, so that we can really observe our minds, to see how we create suffering even out of good things outside or inside, through our lack of skill.

And fortunately, not everything is totally beyond our control. If we didn't have some control over our thoughts, some control over our minds, we would never have thought that we could have any control at all, or as much control as we'd like. The fact is that we *do* have some control, and we can take advantage of that. As the Buddha said, if we couldn't abandon unskillful qualities or develop skillful qualities, there would have been no point in his teaching. But these are things we can do.

So we start with something simple: Focus your attention on the breath. The advantage of the breath is that it's always in the present moment. You can't watch a past breath or a future breath. And this will be a good test of your ability to stay right here. As you work with this, you find that you can stay more and more consistently.

And it's important that you learn how to breathe in a way that feels good. Experiment with different kinds of breathing—fast, slow, heavy, light, deep, shallow, long or short—to see what kind of breathing feels best for the body right now. And you'll probably find, as the mind begins to settle down, that the needs of the body will change as well. So try to be on top of that. Something that may have seemed comfortable five minutes ago is no longer comfortable, so you've got

to change. That, too, keeps you in the present moment. You try to keep on top of things.

If the mind slips off, just bring it right back. Don't get discouraged, just keep coming back, coming back. Each time you come back, try to reward yourself with a breath that feels especially good, nourishing parts of the body that don't usually get nourished by the breath energy. In that way, the mind will be more inclined to *want* to come back.

So that's the main instruction, just stay right here. And you notice that you have to develop certain qualities of mind like mindfulness, the ability to keep something in mind; alertness, your ability to watch what you're doing along with the results that you're getting from your actions; and ardency, looking at your actions carefully to see how they might be improved, in other words, checking the results. If they're not what you'd like, what should you change? Then go ahead and try to change it. This is how meditation becomes a skill. And there's a lot to be learned about the mind simply by getting it to settle down.

There are two purposes in the meditation: One is to gain some tranquility, and the other is to improve your insight. A lot of insight can come, though, simply by dealing with all the issues that prevent the mind from settling down, learning to see them as not so interesting, not so compelling. With the thoughts that would ordinarily pull you away, there's part of the mind that says, "Here, great, we've got a whole hour where we can think about all kinds of things, no other responsibilities." But that kind of way of spending the hour doesn't get much in terms of results.

Because you do have to think about the future. There are lots of ways you could just simply be in the present moment enjoying, say, a beautiful sight, a nice sound, smell, taste, tactile sensation. But what would you have at the end? You'd have an awareness of the present moment that was very nice and then a memory of the present moment that may have been nice. But the memory of nice things is not always happy. Things pass away, and sometimes the things you did in order to gain those pleasures were not all that skillful. But if you focus on the present moment with the thought of developing skill, then you have something to carry with you. The more skill you develop, the better, the more you've benefited. So even though we're focusing on the present moment, we do have an eye to the future.

We're not here just to chill out for a while. We're here to understand our minds, and in particular why they keep creating suffering even though we don't want suffering. Where is the ignorance that forces us to do that? The Buddha said that you look for ignorance in the way the mind fashions its experience. The Pali

term *sankhara* can be translated as construction or fabrication. It's the way the mind puts things together, hoping to make sense out of things so it can use things for its purposes. If the world didn't make any sense, we'd have no control over it at all. Here we are trying to gain some control. So we look at the way we're trying to control things already to see where it's unskillful. And it turns out that the breath is one of the things that we can actually control. A lot of that control is subconscious, but as we're meditating we're trying to bring it up into full consciousness.

Because the way you breathe can have a huge impact on the mind. If the breathing is tight and restricted—too short, too long, not satisfying, not nourishing—it puts the mind in a bad mood. And then from that bad mood the mind lashes out, or goes out someplace else trying to look for pleasure. But here if you can create a sense of well-being simply by the way you breathe, it's totally harmless. The mind will be in a better mood. So, that's one of the processes that you want to learn about, to be more alert to.

The next type of fabrication is what the Buddha calls verbal fabrication, which is the way you talk to yourself. This, too, has a huge impact on the mind, so you want to learn how to talk to yourself in a skillful way. Like right now when you're staying with the breath: Part of the mind may be making comments on how skillful you are as a meditator, and there's a certain level in which that's right and helpful, and a certain level in which it's not helpful at all, especially when you get really down on yourself or complacent. You want to evaluate the breath, evaluate your progress in a very matter-of-fact way. And it's best to focus your conversation on the breath and the mind's ability to stay with the breath with a hopeful purpose. In other words, how can you do this so that the mind will be willing to stay for more breaths the next time around if you've found yourself slipping off? Because it is possible, and you've got to have the conviction that you can do it.

Then when the breath gets comfortable, what do you do with that? You've got to be careful, because there is a tendency when the breath gets comfortable to start focusing on the ease and well-being, and to forget about the breath, or to hope that the concentration will go on automatic pilot. That's like falling asleep at the wheel, hoping that the car will take you where you want to go. You've got to keep your attention *with* the breath, no matter how comfortable it gets. Remind yourself that the sense of ease and well-being will do their work in easing the body, soothing the mind, without your having to wallow in them. So you let the breath be comfortable, and let that comfort stay, but you stay focused on the breath.

Then as that comfort develops, you think about how you might spread it through different parts of the body. Because what you're aiming at here is a sense

of full-body awareness, fully aware of the breath energies: not only the obvious ones where you feel the in-and-out breath, but other subtler ones that go through the arms, the legs, the torso, the head, as you breathe in, as you breathe out. So you've got body, mind and feelings right here.

So the way you talk to yourself is another process you want to learn how to observe and learn how to develop as more of a skill—in other words, to do it in less ignorance and with more knowledge.

Finally, there's what the Buddha calls mental fabrication: your feelings and your perceptions. Feelings here are feeling-tones: the quality of pleasure or pain or neither-pleasure-nor-pain that you feel and that you're already dealing with as you deal with the breath and talk about the breath to yourself.

Then there are perceptions. These are the images you hold in mind. And one main image is an image of what the breath is doing in the body. Another is the image of where your mind is right now, where your attention is right now. So what kinds of image of the breath and the body are helpful? One that allows you to think of the whole body breathing is extremely helpful, because that helps allow the sense of pleasure to course through the body, it makes it easier to develop a sense of ease filling the body, as well as your awareness filling the body. So think of the breath as coming in and out of the whole body everywhere, through all the pores. Think of the body as being like a sponge. As you breathe in, the whole sponge gets breath energy. As you breathe out, all the negative breath energy in the body goes out. Hold that perception in mind.

And you find that as you can deal with these kinds of fabrication more skillfully, with more knowledge, there's a greater sense of well-being that's totally harmless. Then once this does become a skill, you can tap into whenever you want, not only when you're sitting here with your eyes closed, but also as you go through the rest of life. Because the breath is always there; your thinking is always there; perceptions are always there. You want to learn simply how to do these things with more awareness, more skill.

So simply getting the breath and the mind together gives you a lot of insight into what's going on in the mind. It helps erase some of that ignorance that lies at the basis of craving and clinging. That way, even though you can't totally control the body or totally control the mind, you have *some* measure of control and you learn how to exercise that control more skillfully. This gives rise to ease in the present moment, and it's also a skill that you can carry into the future.

In this way, the hour we're spending here really is beneficial. Because it brings more awareness to what's going on, so that the suffering coming from craving and clinging through ignorance gets alleviated, at least to some extent. And as you

cause yourself less suffering, you'll find that other people will benefit as well. So this is how you get the most out of the hour, learning a skill that helps you now and on into the future.