

## *Toward Release*

*April 9, 2019*

Practicing mindfulness means keeping something in mind. Practicing right mindfulness means keeping in mind two activities that we'll be doing here as we meditate.

One is being with the breath. The Buddha calls this keeping track of the body in and of itself. In other words, you don't think about your body in the context of the world: how it looks to other people, how it looks to you, whether it's strong enough to do the work you want, how much longer it's going to last. Just be with it as it is right now: your sensation of the body right here. It's something you know you've got right here. As Ajaan Fuang said, if you can doubt the fact that you're breathing, then you can doubt everything. There would be nothing certain in the world at all.

So focus on something that's sure. You've got the body here. You've got the breath coming in, the breath going out. That's one of the activities of right mindfulness: remembering to stay with the sensation of the breathing in and of itself.

The other activity the Buddha calls "putting aside greed and distress with reference to the world": All your thoughts about what you want out of the world or your past disappointments with the world—put those aside. The problem is that we're very quick at picking them up again. Even though a lot of those issues are not right here right now, we can easily create them into little worlds, and then we go into them.

We're so good at that: creating worlds for our thoughts, worlds for our emotions, and then entering into them, losing our bearings here with the breath. So you have to take apart not only your greed and distress with reference to the world, but also any reference to the world at all. The Thai ajaans talk about this a lot with reference to a Pali term, *sammatti*—although in Thai it's pronounced *samut*. It can be translated as "convention" or "supposition." One of their examples of a convention is paper money. It's just paper, but we give it much more value than just paper. We agree that it's worth one dollar, ten dollars, 100 dollars, and so on, and because the agreement carries on through time, and because enough people agree to it, it's more than just children playing make-believe. We can actually get some value out of the paper. So these suppositions have their purposes. They serve their functions. But outside of those functions, they still are make-believe. And they can be a burden. You don't want to carry them into areas

where they're not appropriate, as when you're carrying a lot of paper money in a sack over your back as you walk into a dangerous neighborhood at night. In the same way, right now as you're meditating, any supposition that has anything at all to do with the world is a burden on the concentration. It's not appropriate here.

People complain about how hard it is to practice nowadays. Part of it's because we're invaded by the suppositions of the world all the time. Or we open ourselves to their invasions. We carry little screens around with us. We're constantly in contact with other people who have those suppositions. To be in conversation with them, we have to pick up their suppositions and agree to them. But when you're coming here to be alone with your breath, you want to divest yourself of them.

For the time being, think of the world outside simply as an idea. And that's what it is in your mind right now: just an idea. You have no other direct experience of it. Memories of the past are things you're churning up from inside. Plans for the future, you're churning up from inside. You could even take your sense of "here" and how you're sitting here—where's east, where's west, where's north, south—and try to erase those directions. Think about the fact that your mind is simply present but not oriented in any direction. We tend to think of the mind as facing forward because the eyes are in the front of the body, and the information from the eyes takes up so much of our awareness. But now that our eyes are closed, we don't need to think about which direction is forward, which direction is back, up, or down. As the Buddha said, you want to make forward and back, up and down, all equal, so that there's just awareness.

That's just one of the conventions of the world that we've brought in. Put aside as many of these conventions as you can. See them as suppositions, things you've supposed into being. And then watch for the mind that wants to go out and get involved in those worlds again. Ask it, "Where are you going? And why are you going?" The more thoroughly you can put away these ideas, the easier it'll be to stay with the breath in and of itself, and to develop your sensitivity for what's actually going on right here in body and mind.

Instead of wanting to know so much about out there, ask yourself something simple about in here. The Buddha starts his instructions for breath meditation with something very, very simple. He says, "Discern long breathing. Discern short breathing." It's interesting that, in his sixteen steps for breath meditation, he uses the verb "to discern" only in the very first two steps: discerning long breathing, discerning short breathing. How are you going to know if a breath is long or short? You have to make comparisons: Is this breath longer than the last one, or is

it shorter? That requires that you be mindful to remember the last breath, and that you can compare it with this one.

It's not that you can put two breaths side by side. The last breath is gone while you're with this breath, and yet you're able to compare it. What are the functions of the mind that allow you to do that? Mindfulness and discernment: mindfulness to remember; discernment to pass judgment. And you *are* passing judgment. So you're not exclusively in the present. You do want to get anchored in something that's right here, something that you don't have to suppose into being, but at the same time you have to exercise some mental functions that can encompass the past. And you want to get good at that. You want to get good at keeping something in mind that's relevant to what you want to do now, and you have to want to develop the ability to make comparisons.

You read so much about what's wrong with the judging mind or the comparing mind. But the only place I've ever seen the Buddha counsel against the judging mind is when he says, "Don't try to judge other people's attainments." You can never really know for sure what someone else's attainment is. But you *do* want to pass judgment on which people are good to hang around with, which people are not, and—in your own mind—which mental states are good to hang around with and which ones are not. And you want to learn how to reliably judge these things for yourself. That requires powers of observation and the ability to ask the right questions, because that's a lot of what discernment is. So we start developing those powers and functions of the mind in the right direction by focusing them on something direct and immediate: the process of breathing.

When the Buddha talks about the factors for awakening, there are two processes or two exercises that he says are really helpful: one is to develop appropriate attention, the ability to ask the right questions; and the other is to practice breath meditation. And it's not as if these were two things to be done separately. You do them together. You focus on the breath, applying the right questions to the breath and to your mind's relationship to the breath.

We're here looking at three things, basically: the breath, the feelings that come up with the breath, and then the mind state that watches and that is soothed by the breath. The mind is both on the receiving end and on the proactive end in its relationship to the breath. On the receiving end, it's alert to the level of comfort coming from the breath and its effect on the mind. On the proactive end, it tries to figure out which kind of breathing is more comfortable, long or short—because that's what appropriate attention does: It asks you which kinds of things are having a good effect and which kinds of things are having a bad effect.

Then you extend that questioning further: When the breath feels comfortable and gives rise to a sense of well-being, even a sense of rapture, what do you do with it? Well, you spread it around. You expand your awareness and try to be aware of the whole body as you breathe in and breathe out. You let the feeling of well-being and rapture spread to fill both the body and your awareness. Then you ask yourself, “What kind of impact is the breath having on the body? What kind of impact is the breath having on the mind?” If the mind needs to be gladdened, you’re happy to breathe in a way that gives energy. If the mind needs to be steadied, you breathe in a way that’s more calming.

Now, even though the Buddha mentions the word “discern” only in the first two steps of breath meditation, that doesn’t mean that you don’t use discernment in the remaining steps. It’s just that the word goes into the background, and the actual issues of discernment come to the foreground. For instance, in the fourth step, the Buddha tells you to calm bodily fabrication, i.e., the in-and-out breathing. In steps seven and eight, he tells you to breathe sensitive to mental fabrication—feelings and perceptions—and then to calm mental fabrication.

Now, seeing things in terms of fabrication is one of the basic principles of insight and discernment: getting sensitive to how the actions of the breath fabricate your sense of the body, and how the actions of feelings and perceptions fabricate your state of mind. But the Buddha doesn’t leave you with just being sensitive: In telling you to calm these things, he’s telling you to make the best use of this sensitivity, to combine insight with tranquility. To calm the body, you calm the breath. To gladden the mind, you focus on feelings and perceptions that give you energy. To steady the mind to get it concentrated, you focus on more calming feelings and perceptions—such as the labels you apply to the body or the breath.

As you do this, you get more and more sensitive to the fact that you are doing things here in the present moment to create this experience. True, you’re not creating it out of whole cloth, but you are fabricating your sense of the present out of the raw material provided by your past kamma. This applies to all your present experiences, whether you’re meditating or not. The desire to fabricate your present experience well and the questions you ask as a result of the desire to do it well: Those qualities take you beyond simply being with the breath and turn into right view and appropriate attention.

Then, once the mind feels soothed by the breath and the feelings of ease associated with the breath, it’ll settle down. The breath itself, then, as the mind settles down, gets more and more steady. More and more calm. It can even get to the point where it stops because your brain is using so little oxygen and the breath

energies in the body are so well connected that you don't need to breathe. Now, you're not forcing the breath to stop. It's just that you feel no need for it. The mind is that calm.

And then the next question is, what do you do with that calm? What do you do with the concentration and equanimity that go along with it? The Buddha talks about developing the factors for awakening even further. He says that, based on seclusion—by which he means the mind secluded in concentration—you try to develop dispassion. You do that by looking at how inconstant the things are that you tend to latch onto in the body, feelings, and mind, and in the world at large. They come, they go, they leave us, and so much of our interest in them is very, very constructed. In other words, a little something happens out in the world and we have to embroider it to make it satisfying enough, interesting enough, to feed the mind. But when you see the extent to which you have to put so much effort into getting satisfaction out of things that are just going to keep leaving you, leaving you, you begin to wonder, “Well, why do I go for that? What's the allure?”

When you can start taking apart some of the suppositions or conventions that you use to create a sense of interest in the world, or to function in the world, you can get down to where the real allure for these things is, what gratification you're getting out of them. And when you begin to see that the allure isn't worth it, when it's compared with the drawbacks: That's when you develop dispassion. Your interest in all these things that you fabricate begins to cease. As a result, the fabrications themselves begin to cease, because the desire that kept them going is no longer there. Part of the mind keeps analyzing what's going on, but it's a very subtle kind of analysis on top of what you've done here.

The mind eventually lets go—and it lets go of everything, even those most basic conventions and suppositions at that point, even the conventions of the path itself. After all, even right view is a convention—it's based on the desire for true happiness, and it has its assumptions and suppositions, which have their value in leading to true happiness. But once that happiness is found, you can let it go, too. In fact, you have to. Otherwise, the mind wouldn't be totally released. Once the letting-go is total, the release, the freedom that's revealed, is total as well.

Now, this is something that *can* be done. It's not just a story that comes from ancient India. We read the stories about people gaining awakening listening to the Buddha and we wonder, “Why was it so easy for them and so hard for us?” That's hard to say. We'd have to go back and interview them.

But we do have the teachings of the forest ajaans and the people who've practiced with them. They say it can still be done. It may be harder now. It may require more work because there are more suppositions to undo. It's really hard to

say. But a lot of it has to do with our willingness to put our suppositions aside, to step back from even the most basic things we assume about ourselves and about the world, and to ask ourselves, “What would the mind be like if we could just drop those assumptions for the time being?” We’re not denying that they have their validity, their time and place. But when you bring them into the mind in areas where they’re not relevant, you create a lot of unnecessary trouble for yourself.

So right now the issues of the world are not relevant. See how much you can put them aside, let them go, and focus on what needs to be done to get the mind to settle down, to develop these qualities of concentration and discernment in dialogue with each other. After all, that’s what it comes down to. In the factors for awakening, you’ve got discernment first and it leads to concentration. In the five faculties, concentration leads to discernment. They’re in dialogue. And the dialogue is about appropriate attention: “Where is the suffering right now? What am I doing to cause it? What qualities of mind can I develop to help abandon the cause so that I can calm the mind and realize what the noble people of the past have realized: that the news of awakening, the news of release, doesn’t have to be just their news. It can be my news, too.”

You have to remember that putting aside suppositions is not something that happens just at the end of the path. When you’re asking the questions of appropriate attention, you’re looking at everything in terms of cause and effect, action and result. A lot of the constructs of the world that we build around our actions and our identities and our thoughts about the world get in the way of directly seeing our actions and their results. So get your discernment in dialogue with your concentration to strip these things away. And you’ll find that instead of becoming poorer as you let things go, you’re actually a whole lot richer.