

Make the Most of This Breath

September 8, 2020

When the Buddha has you focus in the present moment, it's because there's work to be done here, and you don't know how much time you have to do it. But you do know that you have this moment, this breath. As the Buddha said, you should reflect, "If I live just for one more breath, there's a lot of good I could do."

What kind of good can you do with one breath? Well, you can look at your mind. If you see there's anything in the mind that needs straightening out, you do it. If you see that it's wandering off someplace where it shouldn't be going, you bring it back. That's a lot of good right there, because so much of the trouble in the world, so much of the trouble in our lives, comes from the fact that the mind starts wandering off and we don't hold it in check. We start going wherever we want to go, thinking whatever we want to think. And the mind can take itself down some strange alleyways. So when you find a good road, which is the breath, you want it to stay on that road. It gives you a standard of measurement.

Stay right here. Stay right here. Right now. Don't wait for a little time further on in the hour. Right now you want to be right here. After all, how much time do we have? We don't know. The Buddha's teachings on the present moment are always placed in the context of contemplation of death. Death can come at any time. There's no warning sign, no warning signal. No notice is served that you have x number of days. And you don't want to die with unfinished work. The ultimate finished work, of course, would be total awakening. But you want to minimize the unfinished work. So everything that's unimportant, everything that clutters up the mind, clear it away. Ask yourself: What really is important right now? And be as honest as possible with yourself.

The question sometimes arises, "Why does the Buddha have you be so careful with the precept on lying?" Say, for example, that you want to tell a funny story that involves some real people, but you exaggerate a little bit because the exaggeration is for a funny effect. Your listeners know you're not trying to deceive them, and you know you're not trying to deceive them. You're just trying to entertain. People say, "What's wrong with that? Why does that count as against the precept against lying?" It's because if you're careless in how you frame your statements about the world, you're going to be careless about how you look at the mind, because the mind, as Ajaan Chah used to say, is a liar. The first thing you begin to realize as you really look carefully at the mind is how much it lies to itself.

The question sometimes arises with regard to the fourth precept: What's wrong with white lies? After all, they're compassionate. But here again, how pure is your compassion? It's so easy to justify something, saying, "I have compassionate motives." But there may be something else lying behind what looks compassionate. If you're not really honest with yourself, not really scrupulous and rigorous in how you look at things and describe things to yourself, it's very easy to miss the behind-the-scenes motivations that are not so skillful—the ones that are hiding for good reason. They know that if they displayed themselves openly, you wouldn't want to be seen following that kind of motivation. But, as long as it's hidden, you're okay. That's the attitude—and that's precisely the attitude we're trying to uncover here.

There's that great paradox where the Buddha says, "Don't leave things covered up, because they'll get damp and moldy. It's things that are exposed to the sky that don't get damp." Now, of course, things exposed to the sky are exposed to the rain. But they're also exposed to the sun, whereas with things that stay covered, rain seeps in, and there's nothing to dry them out. So try to keep everything open and uncovered in your mind, and making a practice that whatever you say is going to be a correct representation of what you actually believe to be true. Pretty quickly, you find yourself stumbling over areas where, in the past, you tended to be a little bit careless, a little bit sloppy, imprecise, or you fudged things a little bit.

But as you get more careful with your speech, it's going to turn into being more careful as you observe your mind: the verbal fabrications, the directed thought and evaluation that run your meditation will have been exercised. After all, the mind talking to other people is the same mind that's talking to itself. So you want to be really clear about what's happening, how you describe things, making sure to be as accurate as you can. After all, when you're going to be identifying the different hindrances that come up in the mind, the different skillful qualities that can come up in the mind, you want your identification to be accurate, too.

You don't want to mistake, say, an inquisitive mind state for a doubtful mind state. An inquisitive state, of course, is a factor for awakening: It's what allows you to analyze and understand what's appearing in the mind. A doubtful mind state—the one that just doubts everything but doesn't do anything to erase its doubts—is content to sit there and say, "Well, I'm not sure about this," and leave it there. That's a hindrance. So when a question comes up in the mind, ask yourself, "What's the purpose behind the question? Is it there to say, 'Well, as long as my question isn't answered, I'm not going to practice, I'm not going to give myself fully to the practice'? Or is it really an inquisitive question that wants to know?"

You have to look not only at the official motivation for your actions, but also the unofficial, behind-the-scenes ones. You want to be able to identify them clearly and accurately.

In this way, this habit you develop of being really scrupulous in how you talk—saying things that are true, beneficial and timely—helps you become more true, beneficial, and timely in how you observe what’s going on in the mind.

It’s interesting that when the Buddha sets out the various combinations of true and false, beneficial and unbeneficial, timely and untimely, there’s one combination that he doesn’t even consider as a possibility: that something could be false but beneficial. For him, that’s not a possibility at all. So there’s no room for white lies. No room for humorous lies. That doesn’t mean you have to be grim, simply that when you express your humor, try to do it in ways that are in line with the truth. There’s plenty of irony out there in the world the way things actually are. You can be humorous without having to exaggerate.

At the same time, you can be compassionate, not by misrepresenting the truth to people who you feel aren’t ready to receive the truth, but by learning how to avoid the topic. If you see that the topic of the conversation’s heading in that direction, steer it off as quickly as you can before it really gets there, so that the fact that you’re avoiding it isn’t obvious. Or you can learn how to phrase things so that they don’t misrepresent the truth, but you’re not divulging information that your listener might not be able to take, or might actually abuse.

In this way, too, the precept against lying is helpful for the meditation because it exercises your discernment. I was reading someone from another branch of Buddhism saying that wisdom or discernment with regard to the precepts means knowing when to follow the precepts and when not to. That’s lazy discernment. It’s kind of a cleverness maybe, but it’s hard to call it discernment at all.

Real discernment knows how to maintain your precepts and, at the same time, not cause any inadvertent harm by being too straight-arrow in how you interpret them. This requires that you learn how to think your life through ahead of time. “If someone asked me about this, how would I respond in a way that’s not a lie, and yet it doesn’t divulge information that might be abused?” That’s a real exercise of your discernment. When your discernment is exercised like that, then it’s the same discernment you’re going to bring to your meditation.

It’s because of this that the Buddha said that virtue and discernment wash each other—and by virtue here he meant not only virtue but also concentration as well.

Virtue and concentration, on the one hand, and discernment on the other, he said, are like two hands. When you’re washing your hands, your left hand washes

your right hand, your right hand washes your left hand. That way, they both get clean. In the same way, your virtue and concentration wash your discernment, and your discernment washes your virtue and concentration.

So as you go through the day, remember that the day is part of the practice. We're not practicing only when we're sitting here with our eyes closed or when we're doing walking meditation. Following the precepts is part of the practice. It's part of the training of the mind.

Years back, when Ajaan Suwat was leading a retreat back in Massachusetts, at the end of the retreat he was asked, "How do we carry the practice into daily life?" He replied, "Follow the five precepts." Some of the people in the room got upset because they thought he was implying that lay people couldn't handle meditation in daily life. But that wasn't what he meant. Meditation requires a solid foundation. Training in the precepts is training the mind. Remember, the Pali word for meditation, *bhavana*, means to develop. Whatever way you can manage to develop good qualities in the mind and let go of unskillful qualities counts as practice—which means that whatever the right now, you can be practicing. Whether it's right now when you're sitting with your eyes closed, or right now when you're cooking, or right now when you're working in the orchard, or right now when you're sitting around talking with others, there's always something good that can be developed with this breath coming in, this breath going out.

So that's the right way to look at the present moment as your place for practice—not as a place where you're trying to arrive, but as your work space. That way, when you do the work well, it'll take you to something deeper inside, something that's not really involved in "now" or "then" at all. It's not involved in near or far or between the two. But the way you get there is by working right here, right now. Whatever needs to be developed in the mind right now, whatever needs to be abandoned, you do that right now.

The late king of Thailand once asked Luang Puu Dune, "What order should the defilements be dealt with?" Luang Puu Dune answered, "Whichever one arises first, deal with that one first." In other words, you can't plan the practice ahead of time. But you want to have your tools ready—the tools of virtue, the tools of concentration, the tools of discernment—so that whatever problem the mind tosses up at you in the present moment, you've got the tools to deal with it right away. That's when your focus on the present moment will really bear fruit.