

For a Routine That Isn't Routine

April 14, 2021

We meditate every night because we see its importance. The mind needs to be trained; this is the best way to do it. The problem is, when it becomes a daily routine—or nightly routine—it starts *getting* routine. We go through the motions, stop paying attention, which means we miss out on a lot of the opportunities that come from meditating. So we have to learn how to make it special every night.

Part of that we do—which is part of the routine—with the chants we have in the beginning. We think about the Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Sangha. You can sit here and just parrot the words and get that glazed look in your eyes as you stare off into the distance. But it's better to stop and think, “Who was the Buddha? What was his Dhamma like? Who is the noble Sangha?”—what kind of example they set for us. Try to focus on the things you find especially inspiring, to induce an attitude of respect. That way, when the time comes to meditate, you have some respect for the meditation, respect for your breath, respect for your desire for true happiness, respect for what can be learned by watching the present moment.

That's where the Buddha gained his awakening: He was watching his breath. The Dhamma keeps pointing right here: This is where the work is to be done. The noble Sangha has guaranteed that, yes, the Buddha was right. And they invite us to join them.

So keep that attitude in mind and bring some respect. How do you show respect for the breath? First off, you try to be very observant. As Ajaan Fuang used to say, if your powers of observation are coarse, you're going to get coarse things; if they're more refined, you get more refined things.

Ajaan Lee's example is of sifting flour. If the sifter has a coarse weave, you get big lumps. But if it's very fine, it takes longer, but you get fine flour. Then you sift it again, and make the weave even more refined, and you get even more refined flour. The price of the flour goes up. The quality of things you can *do* with the flour goes up.

So try to be observant—and refined in your powers of observation. Make a survey of the body from the head down to the toes; the toes back up to the head. When you breathe in, where do you feel the breath? Where do you *not* feel the breath?

Look at the areas where you don't feel it, and see if you can detect *something*. Sometimes there's a blockage that makes it difficult for there to be any sensation there. So work through the blockage. Other times, you begin to realize that the breath was moving there. It's simply that your powers of observation were too coarse to detect it.

It's like listening to a piece of music far away. You have to get yourself very, very quiet, and listen to very detailed things. In fact, the Buddha himself said that one of the ways you develop discernment—and this is the other way in which you make each evening special, is that you're working on your discernment—is through a willingness to listen. Now, on an external level, this could be listening to someone else talk about the Dhamma. But on the internal level, it means listening carefully to what's going on. Pay careful attention.

The other quality that nurtures discernment is to ask questions. And again, you can ask questions outside of other people, but when you sit down to meditate, ask questions of your mind. What are you doing? Look, observe, ask questions about the breath, ask questions about your relationship to the breath.

Dogen has a nice passage. He says you can simply take the body sitting here as your object, and ask questions about it: "Is the mind sitting in the body? Is the body sitting in the mind? Who's doing the sitting? Does the mind sit? Or is it just the body that sits?"

You can ask all kinds of questions. You'll find that, as you ask the questions, you break things open a little bit. There's a little hint of something that you may not have seen before. So you ask more questions and bring that quality of refinement to the question, to your powers of observation, to your listening.

As you get more and more sensitive to the breath, the breath gets you more sensitive to the mind. What's the mind doing right now? You want to see that there are things going on in your experience right now that you're actually *doing*, and yet you're taking them for granted.

In some cases, you don't even assume that you're doing them; they're just there. But take, for instance, the fact that you have a perception of the shape of the body: That perception is an activity. You have a perception about how the breath comes in, how the breath goes out. You have a perception of where you are in the body in relationship to the breath. So you can ask questions: "How about changing that?"

Last night I mentioned one of the drawbacks of the phrase, "Watch your breath," which is that it assumes that the breath is out there in front of your eyes, when it's actually behind your eyes. Another one of the drawbacks, though, is that you get the sense that the knowledge has to be up in your head. Actually, there's

an awareness in your hands, in your feet, in *every* part of the body. You can let the awareness stay there, the awareness of the breath coming in, going out. You don't have to bring it up into the head. The awareness of the breath in the knee is in the knee; the awareness of the breath in the foot is in the foot. Then try to connect those spots of awareness.

The right kind of questioning doesn't simply sit there asking questions; it comes up with hypotheses, and then you test them: "How about if we try this? How about if we try that?" The hypotheses are basically questions about what other things you could be doing right now to get the mind to settle in more deeply. That way, you can detect things that it's doing that you don't realize it's doing.

I was reading a piece a while back saying that "discernment" is a bad translation for *pañña*; *pañña* is a profound knowledge, where "discernment" is just seeing the difference between this and that, or the connection between this and that. But how are you going to find profound knowledge if you don't start with seeing the difference between this and that, and the connection between this and that?

After all, in Pāli, the word *pañña*, which is sometimes translated as "wisdom"—I prefer "discernment"—is related to a verb, *pajanati*. And the way the Buddha uses *pajanati* covers a wide range of mental functions in which you see the difference between one thing and another. It starts with something really simple: detecting long breathing and short breathing. That's not having profound knowledge of long breathing or profound knowledge of short breathing; it's simply detecting the difference. Then, from detecting the difference, you begin to see, "What effect does one have on the body? What effect does the other have? What effect do they have on the mind?"

By detecting the difference, you can start asking questions. Then you detect things that are more subtle, and you ask more subtle questions. It moves on to detecting when, say, sensual desire is present, when it's absent; detecting when good things are present or absent, like analysis of qualities. And it goes into detecting, "What are you doing that's causing suffering? When does that action start? When does it stop?"

You're discerning these differences. When you discern differences, you can begin to discern connections. It's simply a question of seeing activities you didn't realize were activities; detecting the fact that they *are* activities, and that they're part of a causal chain. You can begin to see how you can manipulate that causal chain in a good direction.

This is what makes each evening's meditation special: when you ask a question, and it leads to an interesting answer.

And the answers will be very particular to you. The basic pattern will be the same for everybody, which is why we can communicate, why we can talk about the Dhamma. But one person can't get into another person and say, "Look, *here*. This is a short breath. This is the effect it has." You have to see that for yourself.

It's as if we're sending messages over walls. The Buddha found things on his side of the wall, and then he sent his messages over the walls to the rest of us—first, to look on our side of the wall. As he said, he points the way; it's up to us to really look, to be observant, to be honest in our powers of observation. That's why those are the two qualities he asked for in a student: being honest and observant, but also a willingness to listen, and a willingness to ask questions. You have to see your side of the wall for yourself.

The main framework for the questions is the four noble truths: What are you doing that's causing unnecessary stress? What could you do to let go of the cause? It's simply a matter of taking those two questions and learning how to apply them to the particulars of your experience. Each breath is particular; each movement of the mind is particular. They follow general patterns, which is why examining an individual event in the mind will help you see patterns. As you observe it again and again, the pattern gets more and more clear, and more useful when it's clear.

There are days when things settle down easily in the mind, and it's very, very quiet. That can be special, but the problem is, you can't carry that quiet around with you all the time. When things are quiet, you want to learn. "Okay, *why* was it quiet? What can I learn from this that I can apply the next time around?" *That's* what you can carry from one meditation to the next, and that's what makes each meditation special: when you observe, when you listen, you ask questions, and a realization comes that you can then put to the test.

Learn to have an attitude of respect for the fact that we do this every night, and this is something that really is valuable. Every breath is teaching something; every movement of the mind is teaching something. If you listen carefully enough, and are inquisitive enough, you can pick up what it's teaching.

So do what you can to develop the right attitude toward each meditation, because then you'll be able to come away with something of real value.