

Nuts & Bolts

September 23, 2023

Take a couple of good long deep in-and-out breaths. Notice where you feel the breathing in the body. It may be in an unexpected place, but wherever you feel it, focus your attention there. The breath is potentially a whole-body process. In the beginning, you want to focus on the parts that are obvious. If long breathing feels good, keep it up. If it doesn't feel good, you can change. Make it shorter, more shallow. Try in long, out short; in short, out long. In long, out short, tends to be energizing. In short, out long, tends to be more relaxing. Ask yourself, what does your body need right now? You can also try fast, slow, heavy, light. Get a sense of what the body needs and how you can provide for those needs by the way you breathe. When you find a rhythm that feels good, stick with it until it doesn't feel good anymore, because the needs of the body will change. So keep on top of what the body needs.

As for any thoughts that come through the mind, you don't have to follow them. The breath is always coming in and going out. The thoughts don't disturb the breath. Our problem is that we leave the breath to focus on the thoughts. If you find that happening, just drop the thought. Don't try to finish it. Just let it go with its ends dangling. Come right back to the breath. No matter how many times you wander off, just keep coming back, coming back. Each time you come back, reward yourself with a breath that feels especially good. That way, the mind will be more and more inclined to want to come back and settle in.

As the breath feels more and more comfortable, sometimes there's a tendency to blur out, to focus on the comfort instead of the breath, in which case you lose the foundation for your concentration. If you find that happening, the next step is to be aware of the whole body as you breathe in and breathe out. And a good way to build up that whole-body awareness is to go through the body first, section by section.

Start down around the navel. Focus your awareness there. Watch it for a while as you breathe in and breathe out to see what rhythm and breathing feels good there. If there's any tension or tightness in that part of the body, allow it to relax, so that no new tension builds up as you breathe in, and you're not holding on to any tension as you breathe out. Stay there for a while and then move up to the solar plexus, the middle of the chest, the base of the throat, the middle of the head. Be especially careful with the middle of the head. Don't put too much pressure on the nerves of the head. Think of the breath coming in freely from all directions,

very gently working through any patterns of tension you may feel in the forehead, the jaws, and the back of the head, and allowing that tension to dissolve away. Then you can think of the breath coming in at the back of the neck, going down the shoulders and the arms; coming in at the back of the neck, going down the back, out the legs. You can survey the body this way as many times as you like.

Even if you're an old hand at meditation, it's good to make a body survey like this at least once a day, just to see what needs to be done to give the mind a good place to stay, because we want to be as fully aware of the present moment as possible. If you can create a sense of ease and well-being in the present moment, it's a lot easier to see what's going on.

We're always forming our intentions, our desires, right here. If we're not present for them, they go on automatic pilot, and we basically lose control of the big factor that's shaping our life, which is the question, "Which intentions do you want to act on?" There are some things you'd like to do but you know will give bad results down the line. So you have to learn how to say No to those intentions. Other things you may not like to do but they give good results in the long term. You have to learn how to talk the mind into wanting to do those things.

You can really see this clearly only if you're here solidly. When you can do this, it's a gift not only to yourself, but also to the people around you, because you'll be more likely to act on harmless intentions. And the simple fact that your mind is steady and at ease means that you're sending off a different energy.

We had a death in the community yesterday. You stop and think about the people who passed away. You think about their good habits, the good example they set, and you want to do something for them.

It's standard throughout the world that when someone has passed away, they do things, one, for the sake of the person who has passed away, and two, for the sake of the people who are still here. For the person who has passed away, one of the best things you can do is to get the mind into good concentration and think thoughts of goodwill toward that person, because the mind, when it's steady, is sending off a good energy. When it's concentrated like this, it's a good gift to be sending out.

You think of Shōtai: Wherever she is right now, may she be happy. May she reap the results of all the good she's done.

At the same time, we think about the people who have passed away as a way of warning ourselves. As the Buddha said, the source of all goodness, the source of all skillful actions, is heedfulness: the realization that your actions really do matter, that they really do make a difference between happiness and suffering—pleasure and pain.

In Shōtai's case, her death was totally unexpected. There was no illness leading up to it. It seems to have been an accident. There was no forewarning. The Sun didn't rise with her name on it that morning. And the same holds for us. We have no idea when we're going to go.

The question, then, is, are you ready to go now? What are you going to take with you when you go? And how are you going to face the prospect of having to leave this body? You're going to need a lot of good mental qualities. You're going to need to be able to keep your mind under some control. That's what we're learning here as we get the mind to settle down. Other thoughts will come up, and you have to learn how to say No. Sometimes it's easy to say No and sometimes it's not so easy. Some of those thoughts have hooks, so you have to be able to catch the mind in time, before it starts weaving more of those thoughts.

Look to see: What's the hook? The Buddha calls this *assāda*—a Pāli term that means *allure*. Sometimes it's translated as *gratification*. Some thoughts come up and they just go right past you. Other thoughts have a real allure and they may or may not be skillful. The amount of the allure is no measure of how good that particular thought will be for your long-term happiness. Some of the thoughts are brand new; others are old thoughts you've thought many, many times in the past. So you have to put the mind in a position where it can question the allure.

This another one of the reasons why we concentrate and try to get a sense of well-being in the present moment, a sense of being solidly here. When you feel solid, you feel safe, secure. Then you can look at these thoughts and question the allure. And you're in a position to question it effectively. If the mind is hungry, dissatisfied, ill at ease, it doesn't question things that it finds appealing. It just goes for the appeal. But as you put the mind in a good shape like this, centered but expansive, you're in a better position to judge.

So after you've done your survey of the body, you can settle down in one spot. Choose any spot in the body you'd like and then think of your awareness spreading throughout the whole body. Think of the whole body breathing in, the whole body breathing out, out to every pore. And however long it takes to do that, and however long you want to stay here, that's perfectly fine. Just getting the mind concentrated like this, with a broad range of awareness but a clear center, is healing for the body and healing for the mind.

It's like a medicine, a cream you put on a rash. You don't put the cream on and then wipe it right off. You put the cream on and you let it stay there.

Now, the mind will fight this sometimes. It'll say, "This is getting boring, nothing's happening." You have to tell it, "That doesn't matter. What matters is that you're learning a particular skill, how to stay with one thing, how to set up a

good intention and stick with it.” And, of course, the thought that it’s boring is one of your first distractions. What’s the allure of that thought? The Buddha says to look at the allure and then compare it with the drawbacks of following that kind of thinking. If you really look fairly, you can see that the allure is pretty weak, whereas the drawbacks are pretty strong. That’s when you can let it go.

Like that analysis the Buddha gave in the passage we chanted just now: These thoughts that come up, are they constant or inconstant? Well they’re inconstant—the Pali word is *anicca*, sometimes translated as impermanent. That translation doesn’t quite get to the meaning. *Anicca* is the opposite of *nicca*. *Nicca* means something you do repeatedly, constantly. If something is inconstant, it’s undependable. That’s what the Buddha’s getting at. There are certain things out there that you know are impermanent, but compared to your life, you can say, “Well, the mountains over there may be impermanent, but they’re permanent enough for me to build a house on them.” Yet if the mountains are shifting all the time—and that’s what inconstant means—then you realize that this is no place to build a house.

That’s one of the drawbacks of your thoughts. You can’t depend on them. Not only are they inconstant, but they also get you to do a lot of unskillful things and then they run away, to leave you holding the bag. So if they’re inconstant, they’re stressful. The Buddha ask then, “If they’re inconstant and stressful, are they really worth holding on to, really worth claiming as you or yours?” It’s a value judgment.

This is another reason why we try to get the mind in a good state of concentration, because it gives you something better to hold on to so that you can make a fair value judgment as you compare the allure with the drawbacks. You can do this many, many times, because all too often the allure is something the mind is afraid to admit to itself, so it’ll lie to you when it tells you about the allure. If you find that you let go of this particular kind of thought but it comes back with new hooks, that means you haven’t really seen the allure. So you have to question it again.

The allure may not be simply that it’s pleasant. Sometimes we have a sense of obligation for certain ways of thinking. We feel, “If I didn’t think in these ways, I wouldn’t be me.” As we mentioned just now, we develop certain patterns of reacting to certain events, reading certain situations in a certain way, and we keep reverting to those ways. But you have to remember, there must have been some point in the past where prior to that particular pattern, you were still you. You could still survive.

So it’s good to think of these voices in the mind as being members of a committee. Like right now, you’ve got many of the members all together here

working on the concentration, working with the breath. You've got some other members, though, that have other ideas. They're waiting for a lapse in mindfulness and then they'll come out, take over. But the fact they can see them as separate members of the committee makes them easier to deal with. If it's just you, you, you, you, you with everything that comes up, you feel that if you drop these things, then you're dropping part of you. If you understand how the mind creates lots of different senses of self around its different states of becoming, you realize that you've got a whole stable in there and you don't need to keep all the horses in the stable. Some of them are getting old. Some of them are troublemakers: They kick you when you feed them. Those are the ones you can put out to pasture.

This makes it a lot easier to let go, because you're creating good things to hold on to inside with the concentration, with the mindfulness and alertness and other good qualities you're developing right now. You can step back from a lot of your attachments and see, "I really don't want to believe that anymore. I really don't want to go there anymore."

As the mind gets more and more quiet, you'll see things a lot more clearly, and a lot of the allure that was hidden from you becomes more apparent. These things come very quickly in the mind. If there's a lot of background noise in your awareness, they can hide in that background noise. You don't detect them. But when things get really, really quiet, and you get quicker and quicker at detecting when a thought begins to stir, you can begin to see why you go for it. As the Buddha says, with some of these cases, as soon as you see the allure, you realize, "I don't really want that," and you let go. Other times, you have to reason with yourself.

This is one of the reasons why there's no one discernment method or one insight method. In fact, the Buddha didn't give any insight methods at all, aside from asking you to question things: Why do you go for that? What are the results?

The questions are very basic, and I think it's good that we keep things basic. If we get very abstract, a lot of things can hide in the abstractions.

This is one of the reasons why the Buddha was such a pragmatic teacher. Think about it: What he saw on the night of his awakening and the seven weeks afterwards was all pretty amazing. He could have spent the rest of his life talking about what an amazing thing awakening is. But he realized that that wouldn't accomplish anything. Instead, he spent all those years teaching the path so that other people could have the same experience themselves.

This is why we focus on the workings of the mind like this, to see where we're being foolish. As the Buddha said, discernment comes when you ask the question,

“What when I do it will lead to my long-term welfare and happiness? What when I do it will lead to my long-term harm and suffering?” You see that your actions are important, that long-term well-being is possible, and that it’s better than short-term. Basic, basic wisdom.

The Buddha showed how you can follow those basic questions and take them all the way to awakening, where there’s no suffering, no limitation of any kind.

So we hold on to the path to take us there. We deal with the nuts and bolts of how our minds lie to themselves—because that’s the message of the four noble truths. The first noble truth is not just that there is suffering. Suffering is the things we cling to. We think we’re getting something good out of them and yet we’re suffering. So our ignorance is not just innocently not knowing. We’re lying to ourselves. We’re ignoring all the suffering we’re creating.

One of the reasons we get the mind into concentration like this is so that we can be more and more willing to see the truth of that. And also to see how we don’t have to keep on acting that way—so that all those Velcro hooks, the things that hold the allure of our thoughts, can get stripped away. And the mind can be free.