

Establishing Priorities

September 11, 2008

When you start to meditate, it's important that you make a firm determination, establishing the firm intention that you're going to stay with the breath for the entire hour. And it's good to remind yourself of the reasons for why you want to do this, because that helps to firm up the intention.

We're here because we want a happiness that's blameless, a happiness that's dependable, a happiness that'll last. And this is the road that leads there: training the mind. The Buddha once said that the difference between a wise person and a foolish one is that the foolish person sees no need to train the mind. Happiness can be bought, happiness can be taken: That's the foolish person's attitude. But the wise person sees that the pursuit of that kind of happiness actually leads to a lot of unhappiness. Whatever little happiness it does produce isn't dependable. It requires that conditions be a certain way, conditions that lie totally outside your control. The fact that those conditions are unstable means that the happiness coming from them is going to be unstable as well.

So reflect on that. Sometimes you hear theories about how causality works in life. And in many philosophies and religions causality typically starts with an unmoved mover, something permanent, something good that gives rise to everything we experience. The question of course is, "Why does a permanent cause lead to changeable results? Why does a good cause lead to undesirable results?" Those ideas of causality offer no help at all. If something is undesirable, where do you go back and change the cause to make it more desirable? If the cause is unchanging, you're stymied. But as the Buddha saw, causes change too—and effects can have an effect on causes.

This is one of the reasons why things are so unstable and unreliable, but it's also part of the way out. The causes of suffering can be changed, which means that you actually can put an end to suffering. The Buddha's approach was not to simply accept suffering as a given in life, that it has to be that way and we simply learn how to accept it and that's the end of the problem. He saw that suffering can actually be brought to an end. And the causes of suffering are largely internal, which means that the way to put an end to suffering is largely an internal job as well. As someone once said, true happiness is an inside job. That's why we train the mind: to search for the causes within it that lead to suffering and see what we can do to change them.

Keep this point in mind as you practice because a common experience in meditation is that you sit here focused on the breath and then after a while suddenly realize that you haven't been with the breath at all. You've been someplace else. There was a lapse of mindfulness, a lapse of alertness. You're usually surprised that it's happened, but you shouldn't be. Expect that the mind will come up with alternative intentions in the course of the hour and be on the lookout for them.

So while you're focused on the breath, you also have to be heedful of the fact that you could lose the breath at any moment. This means that you want to do your best to strengthen your focus, strengthen your mindfulness, strengthen

your alertness. And one way to do that is, as soon as you catch yourself wandering off, immediately come back to the breath but without engaging in self-recrimination. Don't berate yourself for losing the breath. If you do, you'll tie yourself up in another long discourse that'll take you away from the breath again. Just drop the distraction in its unfinished state and come back to the breath as quickly as possible. Reestablish yourself.

And try to get interested in the breath. As the Buddha said, using your powers of analysis is actually one way of leading the mind into concentration. For people who can't calm the mind simply by sticking with the breath, it's good to look into the breath as a process to explore. How does the breathing affect the body? How does the effect of the breath on the body have an effect on the mind? How can you maximize the positive effects? What kind of breathing would feel really good? And when it feels good, what can you do with that good feeling? The Buddha suggests spreading it around, allowing it to permeate the body throughout.

So there's plenty to do here. It's not just in out, in out, in out. When the breath comes in, explore how it's coming in, how it affects different parts of the body. When it goes out, explore and experiment to see what's the most comfortable way of allowing it to go out. All too often our cartoon notion of the breath coming in and going out requires that we squeeze it out when it goes out. But you don't want to do that. The squeezing is actually depleting the breath energy in the body. Try telling yourself that you'll help the breath come in, but when it goes out, it can go out on its own. You don't have to push it. You don't have to squeeze it.

That way you can begin to maintain a sense of fullness that carries from the in-breath even through the out-breath. When you breathe with that sense of continual fullness, the breath feels a lot better. It becomes a lot more interesting. You begin to realize that this breath work we do in the body is a useful way of getting the mind interested in the breath, so that you don't have to force it to stay here. You're here through the power of your curiosity.

At the same time, you have to keep an eye on the mind to notice when it begins to show signs that it's about to wander off. Maybe it's a little impatient; maybe the results aren't coming as fast as you'd like. Nothing seems to be changing. The mind starts looking for someplace else to go, something else to think about.

If you're really alert, you can catch it before a distracting thought is fully formed. The more quickly you can see that process, the better. You can feel that stirring of a form or a thought beginning to occur, like a little tingling or a little stirring around, a little knot in the breath energy. At that point, it's hard to say whether it's physical or mental. It could be either. There will come a point, though, when the mind decides that the stirring is a potential for a thought. It looks into it and turns it into a thought world. The more quickly you can see that happening, the more you're able to zap it at the very beginning of the stirring. This too is something you'll learn in the course of exploring the breath.

So even though we say to keep one eye on the breath and the other eye on the potential for the mind to leave, when you really look carefully at the breath, you'll find that the potential for it to leave is right there as well, in the little knots or stirrings that can develop in the breath energy. So you don't have to split your focus. In this way you can help maintain your original intention to stay

continually with the breath because it's interesting, because there are lots of things here to learn.

A similar principle applies when you leave meditation because you really don't want to leave totally. You spent all this time getting the mind to settle down, and it would be a shame just to throw it away. So there is a skill to leaving meditation as well, a skill to opening your eyes. When you open your eyes, remind yourself that the breath-body is still here, the sense of energy in the body is still here. All too often when we open our eyes, all our attention goes flowing out into the visual world and our sense of the body gets shrunken down, pushed aside, blotted out.

You want to learn how not to do that. In other words, you *can* be aware of the visual world at the same time that you're aware of the breath-energy world. You might ask yourself, "Which contains which? Does your sense of the body contain your awareness of the visual world or does the visual world contain your sense of the body?" See which way of conceiving this relationship helps you to maintain that sense of breath awareness even as you open your eyes, get up and move around, negotiate the outside world, so that your breath awareness becomes more continuous.

This allows you to learn things about the mind, to develop new skills, in the course of daily life. You learn how to maintain a sense of ease even in difficult situations, a sense of fullness at times when your mind would otherwise be daydreaming or drifting around. Instead of wasting your time drifting, you can stay right here and continue to explore the sense of the body, the breath-energy body inside.

You can also begin to sense which things knock you off balance, distract you, pull you out of the body. When you see that happening, you've found an issue to explore. This is how concentration leads to insight. It provides you with a still center from which you can watch the movements of the mind and see where they go. This way you can detect: This is what a defilement is like; it blocks the mind, obscures the mind. You check into it: Is it greed, anger, delusion, lust, fear, jealousy? What are the things that spark these emotions? You see the defilements in real-time.

If you're able to do this, then the next time you sit down it's going to be a lot easier to stay with the breath more continuously. But if you develop the habit of throwing away your concentration as soon as you get up, it's going to be easier to throw it away in the midst of your meditation. You've got to keep in mind the fact that the mind has to be trained if you want to gain true happiness, and you don't want to train the mind only when you sit here with your eyes closed. You want the training to be 24/7 because the mind's potential to create problems is 24/7 as well.

So it's a matter of establishing your priorities. What kind of happiness do you want? What are you willing to give up to attain that happiness? How much time and energy are you planning to invest, willing to invest to find true happiness?

This is another aspect of wisdom: keeping your priorities clear. If true happiness is the top priority, that helps to pull the mind out of its ignorance—in other words, its overriding concern for other issues—and to bring the issue of suffering and the causes of suffering up to the fore. That's what clear knowing is all about, making it your clear priority that the issue of suffering is paramount. This is the most important issue to deal with. When the Buddha talks about

ignorance, he's not talking about a general lack of knowledge about things. You can know many things and still be ignorant of the big issue. And part of that ignorance comes from the fact that you don't really regard the big issue as the big issue. You've got other priorities, other agendas.

But the Buddha wants you to see that the question of suffering is *the* big issue in life. Your ability to train yourself to put an end to it should be your top priority. When I was up in Bellingham this last weekend, I was out walking after the meal. A guy looked at me and asked, "Buddhist?" I said, "Yeah." He said, "Why are there so many religions in the world?" I answered, "Because the different religions ask different questions." "So what's the Buddha's question?" "His question is: 'Why are we suffering and what can we do to put an end to it?'" "Don't you just hate that question?" he said. I said, "No, I think it's a pretty good question." The fact that there's suffering is something you might not like, and it's natural not to like it, but it would be strange to hate the question of why it happens and how you can put an end to it. We should regard this as the most important question to try to answer because it's the most useful, most fruitful question we can explore. It's a privilege to be able to ask this question and answer it. That's why one of the duties with regard to the four noble truths is to develop the path, the way out of suffering. This is what we're doing here right now.

So wisdom is largely a matter of priorities. As you're sitting in meditation, as you go through life, your top priority should be to stay here with the breath so as to develop the powers of mindfulness, concentration, and discernment that will allow you to realize the end of suffering. A lot of the practice is learning how to stick to those priorities and not let other priorities sneak in.