

Technique & Attitude

October 2001

When you meditate there are two things that are important to focus on.

One, is the technique: simply what you do. How you focus on the breath. How you keep the breath in mind. And how you're alert to the breath. There are specific steps, specific techniques that you want to master, because it is a skill. And having a specific technique like this gives you a way of measuring the currents of the mind against each other. It gives you a firm point of reference.

Once you know that you want to stay with the breath, any thought that pulls you away from the breath is automatically something you want to drop. You don't have to sit and think about it, "Should you follow this, should you follow that?" This makes things a lot easier, because you're very clear-cut with your sense of which is the right direction, which is the wrong, which is the path, and which ways of acting go off the path.

So when you're trying to center the mind, find a technique that's congenial to you. If you have trouble focusing on the breath in the beginning, you can combine it with a meditation word like *Buddho*. *Bud-* with the in-breath, *-dho* with the out-.

Some people find it easier to start out by contemplating different parts of the body. Say with the bones: Visualize the bones in your body and just go through the body from the toes on up, or from the fingers on up the arms to begin with, then the toes on up the legs up the back up to the skull, having a sense of where each bone is while you visualize it. Some people find this to be a good way of getting the mind to settle down in the present.

Whatever the technique, as long as you find that it helps you get the mind still and centered in the present, and sensitive to what's going on right here and now, it's a useful concentration technique.

But there's more to the meditation than just technique. There's also the attitude behind it.

We have a tendency here in the West to divorce the technique from the background—the assumption being that you give the technique to anybody and they're going to all come to the same realizations.

But experience hasn't borne this out. If you come with different expectations, different assumptions, you're going to end up with different results.

This is where the other parts of the training come in.

The Buddha talks about generosity and virtue as foundations for the meditation. Virtue as a foundation for the meditation deals with the life you live. The attitude you take toward the life you live is going to affect the way you meditate. So you want to make sure that you've got things straightened out in that area as well.

And there's a series of meditation themes that connect your life and your meditation.

They're called the six recollections. They help you to develop the right attitude to get the most out of the meditation, and they also connect with the way you live your life.

The first three are the recollection of the Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Sangha.

One way of recollecting the Buddha is just to repeat the name Buddhho. But that doesn't give you all the full benefits of the recollection. Sometimes it's good to think about his life, the kind of person he was, the person who taught the path that we're following here. Where he came from.

And you all know the story, the strong sense of *samvega* that he developed as he saw that all the pleasures he had been enjoying as a prince were subject to aging, illness, and death. He himself was subject to aging, illness, and death. Everything around him seemed to be all destined to the same end: aging, illness, and death. He felt a strong sense of awe, terror, dismay when this realization really hit home—this strong need he felt to get out of that trap.

Then there was the sense of confidence and conviction he felt when he saw forest renunciants: "If there is a way out, that's the way you have to live." He was willing to make all kinds of sacrifices in order to find that way out.

And once he'd found it, he didn't have to sell his teaching to anybody. He didn't really need to teach anybody. It was totally an act of compassion.

You wade through a lot of Dhamma that's on the marketplace today and you wonder exactly how much of this is just advertising copy and how much of it really is Dhamma. But when you look at the Buddha himself: He wasn't that kind of person. Everything he said was Dhamma. Everything he said was a pure gift. He didn't need anything from anybody else. So that's the kind of person who discovered the path that we're following.

And you want to try to develop those qualities in your life as well—or at least take confidence in the path, that there's nothing in it that's just there for show, nothing in it that's just to sell you on the practice. It's all simple, unadorned truth on the ways of the mind, and how the ways of the mind can be mastered so that you can get beyond suffering.

These are good things to think about as a background to the meditation.

Similarly with the recollection of the Dhamma. You just think about what kind of teaching this is.

Recollection of the Sangha: the people who have followed this path and gotten results. Sometimes when we think about the Buddha, he seems superhuman. So it's good to think about the Sangha, the Noble Sangha, what kind of people they are. They come from all walks of life, all types of people: men, women, children, young, old, middle-aged, wealthy, poor, sick, healthy, smart, dumb in the ways of the world. But they've all taken the practice and they taken it to heart, and they have all been able to benefit from it in the ways that the Buddha promised.

At some point in their practice they all had the same strengths and weaknesses that you have right now. So when you think about them, realize, okay, they were able to take their strengths and use them to overcome those weaknesses. They can do it, you can do it.

Thinking about the Sangha also gives you a strong sense of a long lineage that comes down over the centuries: the people who've seen the value of what the Buddha taught and passed it on. Out of a sense of gratitude toward them, you want to get the same benefit out of the path so that you can pass it on to other people as well.

Because the most effective passing on is just that: from someone who's seen the benefit of the path—not from someone who looks at it from the outside and says, “Well, actually it'd be better if it'd be like this or we'd like it like that, maybe we can change this,” and then pass that on to other people. That doesn't have the same effectiveness and can actually get in the way.

So there are lots of benefits from contemplating the Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Sangha to create the context for the practice.

The other three recollections have more to do with gaining a sense of confidence in yourself.

They're called recollection of generosity, recollection of virtue, and recollection of all things of the devas. Recollection of the devas basically means thinking about the qualities that make human beings into devas when they pass away: the virtues they develop, the good qualities they develop. Then you realize that you've got those good qualities too.

It's the same with the recollection of generosity and the recollection of virtue. You think about your own generosity, your own virtue, the times when you've given up things that you would really like but you realized that it would be better if you gave them to someone else—and you make that sacrifice.

Or virtue: the times when you held to firm principles in your actions even though it might have been easy, might have been convenient to bend them a little bit—but you didn't.

When you can think about these things, they give you a strong sense of self esteem. They also give you confidence in the practice that, Yes, it is something you can do and you've seen the results that come from it.

Ajaan Suwat once commented when he was teaching a retreat at IMS on how grim people were when they came to the meditation. And his analysis of it was that they were coming straight to the meditation without having gone through generosity and virtue. As a result, they didn't have that sense of confidence, the sense of joy that comes when you follow the teachings and get results, so that you become confident: “Yes, these teachings really do give results and Yes, I am becoming a better person, a happier person because of following them.” These things give you a kind of momentum that you can then carry into the meditation, so that you're not just starting from scratch.

Some people claim, say, with the precepts, that setting up standards like that is setting yourself up for feelings of inadequacy. But that really misunderstands the whole point of having goals. Can people live without goals? Can people be happy if they know that their goals are low? The only real self esteem you can live with is if you act in ways that really are deserving of respect.

And the precepts are not superhuman: no killing, no stealing, no illicit sex, no lying, no drugs or alcohol. People can follow these principles and still live. And they find that they live very happy lives as well. There's a sense of solidity within them. They have something that's very valuable.

If you can hold to that precept against lying, for instance: Suppose someone came along and said, "Okay, I'll give you a million dollars to lie." You say No. Just that decision right there means that you've got something within you that's worth more than a million dollars.

Of course, what this means is that when you're using these themes as recollections, you actually do have to be generous in your life, you do have to follow the precepts. It's not just an exercise in free association.

And if you want to gain strength from these recollections, you can't just be generous once or observe the precepts once and then have that serve forever. You've got to keep doing them, these practices, again and again and again; keeping them alive in your life, so that you have a live memory of generosity, a live memory of virtue and all the other good qualities that are needed to make you a good person. They're there. You rewrite the narrative of your life through your actions now so that you'll have a better narrative to look back on.

It's like that saying, "If you don't like the news, go out and make some of your own." If you don't like the narrative of your life, create a new narrative by making new choices.

And that life provides the context within which you can meditate. If you find that the narrative of your life has a lot of sticky points of denial or regret, it's very hard to put that narrative aside and let the mind settle down in good concentration.

But if the narrative is free of those sticky points, free of self-deception, free of denial, your mind is open to the truth. Denial means closing you off from the truth. How can a person who closes him or herself off to the truth meditate properly? There'd be these big hidden areas of the mind.

But when you find that you can be open with yourself in this way, it's a lot easier for the mind to settle down, to drop the narrative of the past and the future, and just get into the present moment without a lot of mental dishonesty.

So these six recollections are important in providing the context for the meditation: both the actual day-to-day life context that you create as you make your decisions in daily life, and also the attitude that you bring into the meditation. It becomes a much healthier attitude, much more conducive to getting results in the practice.

So whatever your home meditation technique, whether it's the breath or parts of the body or whatever: It's good to have these other themes at hand as well. And keep them alive because they're what keeps the meditation alive and growing.