

Our Primary Responsibility

December 27, 2003

The next hour is your opportunity for the mind to put aside all its other responsibilities and just to look after itself. You often spend the day involved in all kinds of activities—responsible for the body, responsible for other people, and yet the mind really has a chance to be responsible for itself, to look after itself. Actually, it's probably your most basic responsibility. Whatever responsibilities you have outside have to depend on the mind's being in good shape. All too often we let those responsibilities fill up all our times so there's not enough time left to really look after the mind. So this is our opportunity to make some space, to take some time, and focus it on this one factor that controls all the other factors in our life.

So look what you've got here? You've got the body sitting here breathing. What we're going to do is learn how to take that and make that a good place for the mind to stay. Watch your breath for a while. When you breathe in, where do you notice the sensation of breathing in? When you breathe out, where do you notice that sensation? Focus your attention there and watch it for a while. Get a sense of whether it's comfortable or not. If it's not, you can change. You can change the rhythm of the breathing, you can change the texture of the breathing, making it harsher or more gentle. You can change the speed, in fast or in slow, out fast or out slow, all kinds of things you can adjust here. And then watch the results.

This is a basic principle throughout all the Buddha's teachings: to watch. Do something that you think will lead to happiness and then watch it. Does it really lead to happiness? The word *sukha* in Pali covers all kinds of things, from simple pleasure, to ease, to a sense of happiness, well-being. What we're focusing on is the mind's basic desire to look for a sense of well-being, and then to check on how things are going. All too often we look for happiness blindly. Somebody else says, "This is going to be good, that's going to good." We do what they say. Someone else comes along and says, "How about this? Try this." We try all kinds of things. We very rarely look deeply at whether or not we're actually gaining true happiness from those things.

So focus on what you're doing right now and get a sense of how to gauge whether the results are coming in the way you want them to. After all, you're perfectly free to breathe in any way you like, perfectly free to try deep breathing, say, for a while, to see if it feels really good. There's nobody out there to say, "Well, you failed that test, or you are not right, this is not as comfortable as it could be." *You're* the one who is gauging the results, and it's up to you to decide what feels good over the long term. Sometimes you'll find the rhythm of the breathing will change, as your physical condition changes, as the mind begins to settle down. Other times you'll find there is a fairly steady rate that feels good, and all you have to do is stay with that steady rate. But it is entirely up to you. After all, this is a time for the mind to look after itself, and so it has the freedom to decide what to do with the breath.

This also helps create a sense of interest. If you simply told the mind to stay with the breath and not do anything to it, you wouldn't really learn that much. But if you experiment, you find out what works, what doesn't work. That helps keep the mind inquisitive. How would it feel if you breathe with this part of the body? How would it feel if you breathe with that part of the body? You can breathe with the abdomen, you can breathe with the chest. Then as you get

more and more sensitive to the breath of the body, you discover that's not just the air coming in and out of the lungs. There's a flow of energy throughout the whole body that corresponds to the breathing. You can play with that as well.

As you do this, you discover that there is an awful lot to observe in the present moment. At the same time, you discover that the present moment is a more and more inviting place to stay. But it takes some getting used to. You have to get familiar with the territory. It's like going into a new city. You go there, and the guidebooks say that this is a good place to visit, a good place to eat, and you try what the guidebooks say. But after a while, experimenting and trying out different places, different coffee shops, different restaurants, different places, you find where *you* would like to stay. The guidebooks are there to give you a start, but then it's your own exploring that helps you discover where you really do feel at home.

The same with the breath: You can focus on different parts of the body, you can choose the tip of the nose, the base of the throat, the middle of the chest, the abdomen, but those are just for beginning. You can explore other places as well—wherever you like to focus your attention and it's easy to keep track of the fact that now the breath is coming in, now the breath is going on, and it feels good.

So think of the meditation as a process of exploration. You want to get familiar with the territory here, because there are times when you need the breath to give you a sense of energy, there are other times when you need to breath to calm yourself down. Now you've got a good chance to explore what the potentials of the breath are, what it can offer you.

So as you're getting acquainted with the present moment, be aware (1) of the fact: you're trying to get the mind to settle down, and (2) you want to be an observant. These two things have to go together, because these are the two qualities on which everything else depends in the meditation.

When the mind gets more stable, has a greater sense of well-being. It can see things more clearly. It can watch itself with a steadier eye. That way you come to understand yourself a lot better. So often our knowledge of our own mind comes in bits and pieces. If you were to plot your knowledge on a piece of paper, it would be like connect-the-dots: a little dot here, a little dot there. You have no idea whether it's going to be a bird or a plane or a ship or whatever. Then you decide, well this is a ship, and so you take the different dots and you connect them into a ship, or you connect them into whatever. Sometimes you ignore a dot or two to make the ship; sometimes you add a few extra that weren't really there. But it's a lot of guess work. The only way to really know the mind is to stay with it consistently over a long period of time. That way you begin to see how things are connected. You don't have to make things up. You don't have to guess.

At the same time, the more alert you are, the more sensitive you become to different levels of well-being in the mind, different ways of putting the mind at its ease, and providing what it needs in terms of the breath, in terms of your awareness—because it's these two qualities together, the mindfulness and the breath, that can help the mind. You begin to sense when the mind is leaning too far in the direction of greed, leaning too far in the direction of anger. Then you can figure out ways to correct it, to bring the mind back into balance, so that it's not leaning all the time, so that it has a more stable sense of feeling right, right here. So in this way the stillness of the mind helps your powers of observation; your powers of observation help the stillness and sense of well-being in the mind. They go together like this all the way along the path.

So allow yourself to spend the rest of the hour exploring this question: What does the breath have to offer the mind, what does the mind have to offer the breath? As for other thoughts, just let them pass right through. You don't have to pay them any attention. In fact, sometimes paying attention to them even to the extent of trying to chase them away is enough to give them a place to land. Think of your awareness as a wide open field, and there are going to be horses, hippopotamuses, and all kinds of strange animals wandering through, but you don't have to worry about them, because they'll just pass right through. None of them are planning to settle down. *You're* the one who tends to pull them in trying to domesticate them. Then you have to struggle with them because they're basically wild.

So whatever thought comes passing into the mind, just allow it to pass right through. Keep your sense of awareness centered but open, so that it doesn't feel constricted in the present moment, so that it has a sense of belonging here. This makes it easier for you to maintain the sense of being centered, not only while you're sitting here with your eyes closed, but at any time throughout the day. Once you can develop the sense of having a home, having a resting spot here in the present moment and knowing where it is, then it will always be there for you to revert to, whenever you have the chance.

In this way, the practice of looking after your mind gets more and more built into the way you treat your mind throughout the day. It's not just a special treat every now and then. It becomes an integral part of the way you relate to your thinking, how you relate to all your tasks in the course of the day, knowing that if you want to do anything well, the mind has to be in good shape. You have a place to let it rest. Of course, it's good to have a place to rest for long periods of time, because many times the work of the breath is like a salve, or cream that you rub on your skin. It's not the case that you rub on the skin and everything gets healed immediately. Sometimes it takes time.

But for right now, we've got the whole hour. Let the breath do its work on the mind. Get a sense of what kind of breathing really feels good. Breathe in so that it feels satisfying, breathe out in such a way you feel like you're letting go of any tension you've been holding onto. Then do it again and again, because as you meditate, you're providing all the things the mind needs. It's almost like you've got food for the mind, clothing, shelter, medicine for the mind, all its basic requisites—simply through this combination of being alert to the breath and having a sense of how to make the breath more and more satisfying. If you give time to this, you'll find it rewards you with a sense of well-being for the body, a sense of well-being for the mind, and also increases the alertness that helps the mind see what it's doing and what the results of its actions are. That's a very important set of skills we want to learn how to apply to all things we do in life, so we can see more precisely where the actions we do for the sake of happiness really do give results and where they don't—so we can learn and reshape our actions accordingly.

This is the basic attitude of the Buddha's teachings: that happiness is a skill, and it's a skill that can be mastered. In the course of mastering, you learn more than just simple smile-on-your-face happiness. You learn deeper and deeper levels of well-being as you develop greater and greater levels of sensitivity and alertness. The more time you devote to that quest, the better, because it can take you a lot farther than you might imagine.