

A Mind like Wind

November 17, 2007

When you come to the monastery, you tend to bring a lot of other things trailing in your wake. You sit down and they gather around you: issues from your family, issues from work, issues from home, and issues from the media. If you want to create some space for the mind, you have got to cut these things away. This is why meditation starts by establishing a frame of reference.

You start out with the body in and of itself. In other words you're not thinking of your body in the world, whether it's a good looking body or not, whether it's strong or weak one, agile or clumsy. All of those issues relate to the body in the world. You want to avoid them because it's very easy to slip from there into other world issues: what other people are thinking, what other people are doing, what you think about their thinking, what you think about their doing. You want to be able to cut through these things, so keep reminding yourself you're going to stay with the body in and of itself. You've got the breath right here. That's a body issue in and of it self.

Learn how to relate to the breath in a friendly way. That makes it easier to stick with it. Learn how to be sensitive to how it feels when it's long, how it feels when it's short, and decide which kind of breathing feels best for you right now. You can choose, you know. The breath, after all, is a bodily fabrication that has an element of intention in it. So take advantage of that.

As the breath gets more comfortable, you can start thinking about being aware of the whole body as you breathe in and as you breathe out. This helps you move into the present moment with a sense of belonging here. You're not squeezed out of the present by being confined to just one little part of the body. You can inhabit the whole body and simply stay right here, allowing the breath to calm down. You don't force it to calm down, but as you're trying to be aware of the whole body, you're not thinking about other things.

The more you can inhabit the present moment like this, the harder it is to switch off to the past or the future. It's almost as if you have your hands and feet nailed down so you can't go running off anywhere else. And that way the breath can calm down naturally because you're thinking less, so you're using less oxygen. The thinking is focused right here, on the body in and of its self. Ajaan Lee compares this kind of thinking to grabbing hold of a post and running around it. As long as you hold on to the post, then no matter how much you run around, you don't get dizzy. But if you let go of the post and try to spin around, you get dizzy and fall down. So hold on to the post of the breath, and your thinking can circle around the breath. Just be careful that it

doesn't lose its frame of reference and go running off into the world.

This is called establishing mindfulness or establishing a frame of reference. Once it's established, you develop it by holding on to that frame of reference as other things come up. You're aware of things arising and you're aware of things staying and passing away, but you don't lose touch with your body. If a thought comes up, see how it relates to the body. What feelings arise in the body together with the thought, what feelings pass away when the thought passes away? This is a useful insight. You see what you do as you're thinking. In order to stay, a thought has to have its little niche there in the body, a spot with a little bit of tension that you associate with the thought as a reminder, a kind of marker, that that's the thought you're going to stay with.

When you see this happening, learn how to breathe through that little niche of tension. Then the thought will go away. Then you can carry this skill out into other activities as well, as you're walking around the monastery, as you're doing chores or interacting with other people. Try to stay with the body as your frame of reference—how it feels to be in the body when you're talking, when you're walking, when other people say things that you react to. Look for the reaction primarily in its physical side: how it influences the body and how it affects the body. That gives you a handle on how to deal with issues that come up in the mind.

There's a passage in the Canon where the Buddha's teaching Rahula how to meditate, and he starts out by telling him to meditate with a mind like earth. When people spit on the earth, the earth doesn't get disgusted. When people put flowers on the earth, the earth doesn't get delighted or elated. It just stays right there. Or, you can meditate with a mind like fire. Fire will burn up disgusting things and it will burn up nice things, and not really feel one way or another, liking or disliking the things it burns. Or meditate with a mind like water. Water will wash away clean things, it'll wash away fragrant smelling things, it'll wash away foul smelling things, but whatever it's washing away, the water doesn't give rise to likes or dislikes. Or meditate with a mind like wind. The wind will blow nice things and bad things away. It will blow ash over here from the fires. It will blow the smell of a flower, but it doesn't feel one way or the other about what it's blowing.

So where do you get in touch with earth, fire, water, and wind? Right here in the body. The body is made out of these same sensations: solidity, liquidity, warmth, movement and energy. They're all right here in the body. So take your cue from the body. When there's a disturbance in the body, realize it. There may be a change in your heart rate, a change in feelings of tension or tightness in different parts of the body. Remind yourself that these things may be the result of the mind's actions that spread into the body. These things can take hold if we allow them to stay in the body. But you can adjust them, zap them, with your breath.

So, this is one way of dealing with recurring thoughts. As soon as you sense the tension or the reaction, just undo it. Try to breathe in a way that allows the blood to

flow smoothly at all times, so you're not reacting to things outside. In one sense it helps you take possession of the present moment, so you really feel like you belong here. You're not being pushed out by other people's actions. At the same time, you give yourself a stronger position from which to look at your reactions.

When you react with disliking, liking, desire, or fear, exactly what's going on? These things gain a lot of power because they have their physical component as well as their mental component, but if you defuse the physical component those thoughts are a lot easier to look at. They're a lot less overwhelming. Then you can start looking at the stories behind them.

Say somebody gets you angry: What are the stories you tell yourself about that person?—about how that person should be acting and why he isn't acting the way you want him to. Learn to look at those stories with a skeptical eye. Sometimes you hear the idea that when you meditate you're supposed to practice radical acceptance, as if that's what the path were all about. While you accept what's actually going on, you've got to do a lot more. You've got to learn how to be skeptical about what's going on as well. These stories that the mind tells itself: Why believe them? What do you gain by believing them? Are they really true? How much do you know about their truth? Even if they are true, are they really beneficial? You've got to have a certain skeptical ear as you listen to these thoughts, and a skeptical eye as you observe what they're doing.

It's only with this measure of skepticism that you can begin to recognize your defilements for what they are. The sense of being at ease in the body helps keep that skepticism from becoming bitter or cynical. Simply learn to put a question mark next to things. Is that really true? Is it really beneficial? Is this really the right time to be thinking that thing? Why should I believe that story if it makes me suffer? In this way, you learn how to free yourself from a lot of influences that otherwise would take over your mind and then stay there ensconced for days on end. This ability to be a little bit skeptical can keep you sane in the midst of all the insanity going on around us.

I was talking with a yoga teacher today who said that her clients were all saying they wished it were January 1st, that they were done with the holidays. All the Christmas stuff is very stressful for a lot of people. It's supposed to be fun, it's supposed to be joyful, but it's just a lot of stress and a lot of hassle. She wanted to know what to tell her students. I said to tell them to approach the whole thing like an anthropologist, watching the quaint customs of the natives, and allowing yourself to stand apart from them a little bit.

This is what being with the body—trying to get in touch with just the physicality of the body, trying to maintain that mind state that's like earth, water, wind, and fire—can do for you. It gives you a good solid place to stand, a separate place to stand, a place where you've got your internal sense of wellbeing. You're not hungering after the things of the world, so you don't have to gobble them down. You can question them.

This way you establish a sense of seclusion. When they talk about the happiness of

jhana being based on seclusion, this is the kind of seclusion they're talking about. You're not only sitting here separated from society at large but you're also standing apart a bit from your thoughts. You've got a different frame of reference that allows you to question the stories and not identify with them so much.

So, develop a mind like fire, wind, earth, and water, a mind that's in tune with the body as you're experiencing it right here, right now—and particularly with the breath, which is part of the wind element. If there are any aberrations in the breath, put a little question mark next to them. Does it have anything to do with a mental event that just happened? Is there any reaction going on, any anger, any lust, any fear? Then breathe through the aberration. If it's necessary to deal with the thought, okay, you're dealing with it from a much better perspective. You've got a different frame of reference from which to look at the thought. If you don't have to deal with it, that's fine. Just breathe through it and let it go. If you have trouble analyzing the thought, maybe your concentration isn't strong enough for it yet, so learn how to put the thought aside. The important thing is that your frame of reference be strong, solid, and imperturbable.

This is why mindfulness practice shades ultimately into concentration practice because you're sticking with one thing as your frame of reference and it becomes continual. The Buddha himself never drew a sharp line between mindfulness and concentration. Mindfulness as it grows stronger becomes concentration. It becomes purified in concentration, steadied so that your discernment can start doing its work; figuring out where there are still Velcro hooks on your mind and how you can shave them off, not getting snagged and sucked into the story lines that make you suffer.

So, learn to see the body, your experience of the body, largely as breath. Then make your mind like breath. When they come together in this way, you've got a really solid place to stand.