

True to the Breath

September 18, 2005

Focus on your breath. When the breath comes in, know it's coming in. When it goes out, know that it's going out. When it comes in again, stay with the breath again. Just keep with that one topic, all the way through the in-breath, all the way through the out-. It's there all the time. The problem is there our attention isn't there all the time. We can go wandering around, or worse than wandering around: We jump around. As a result, the mind knows no peace. It keeps creating little worlds for itself and then suddenly finds itself *in* those worlds. They can take it many years, many miles away. And because those worlds are fabricated, after a while, they start falling apart. What the mind usually does then is that it fabricates another world, then another one, then another one. It doesn't find any truth that way, because it's off in its own fabrications.

If you want to find the truth about the mind, you've got to stay right here to watch it in action. Even though it may move, you don't have to move along with it. There's a part of the mind that just observes the whole process of fabrication. The Buddha compares fabrication to streams in the mind that go flowing out, but you don't have to go flowing out with them. You just watch. Try to keep your frame of reference right here in the present moment. The breath is a good way to do that, because there's no future breath you can watch, no past breath you can watch. There's just the breath coming in right now, going out right now.

As for other fabrications, there are what they call verbal fabrication, where the mind creates words inside before it actually speaks, all the mental chatter going on. Again, you don't have to get involved in what it's about. Just look at the process: There's chattering going on. Don't get sucked into it. Otherwise, it's like a crazy person coming up and trying to get you into his crazy world. Sometimes even just telling the person to go away will cause him to latch on to you. If you get involved in actually arguing with the crazy person as to whether what he says is true or not, then you're really finished. The best thing to do is to let the crazy person chatter but you don't have to get involved in the chatter. Just remind yourself: That's a crazy person chattering. After a while, the crazy person sees that you're not interested and he'll go away.

A lot of the chatter in the mind is just like that. If you get involved in it, trying to figure out whether it's true, whether it's good, whether it's right, then you're really entangled. But if you see it simply as a process of fabrication, in which the mind is making up these words, then you realize that just because there are words

going through the mind doesn't mean that they have to be true—or that they have to refer to anything at all.

The same with mental fabrications: the feelings and perceptions of the mind. Try to see them simply as a process. A feeling comes, and you decide immediately whether you like it or dislike it and then you get involved in it. It becomes *your* feeling. Then *you* feel happy, *you* feel pleasant, or *you* feel pained. It's no longer just a process. It's *your* feeling, and that starts getting you entangled as well. You're worried about what it means. Especially if it's pain: You really worry about what it means. But if you can see it simply as a process, something that arises for a while, stays for a while, then passes away, you don't have to get involved. This is what allows you to stay in the present moment.

In other words, you try to cut off all the things that would connect you to the past or the future. You do it bit by bit by bit. It's not that you never will want to think about the past or future ever again. That's a skill the mind already has mastered. You don't lose that skill when you meditate. You simply learn when to use it and when not. For the time being, the skill lies in trying to stay right with the present moment and not allowing yourself to get entangled in these other worlds.

So when a thought arises in the mind, you don't have to complete it. You don't have to explore it. You can see that there's a little stirring in the mind, but leave it just on the level of stirring. You stay with the breath. Try to make the breath as comfortable as possible.

This is one of the most important principles of the practice. If the breath is uncomfortable, you're not going to want to stay with it. But if it feels good coming in, feels good going out, you'll want to stay. That's a process of fabrication that's actually useful. After all, concentration itself is a kind of fabrication, but it's a helpful fabrication. Instead of pulling you away from the present moment, it helps you stay here, so that you can see other fabrications as they come and go. Ultimately, you'll want to turn around and look at this process of fabrication, too. But for the time being, though, just focus on being with the breath, making the breath comfortable.

You can experiment with different rhythms of breathing. You make it faster or slower, deeper or more shallow, heavier or lighter—all kinds of ways you can play with the breath—until you figure out which kind of breathing feels good for the body right now. Then just stay there. All too often, the mind feels a compulsion: "Got to go someplace else. What's the next place? What's the next place?" Well, time keeps providing you with a new moment all the time. All you have to do is stay with the breath in that new moment.

There's nowhere else you have to go, nothing else you have to do. Just work on this one process of staying with the breath and exploring the breath. Give it your full attention. Think of the breath coming in and out of the body through every pore of your skin. It's coming in and out in all directions. Your only duty is to keep tabs on it. This way, the breath helps you get out of all those worlds of the mind, all those old tapes, all those old movies, the old discussions that go bouncing through the mind, ricocheting through the mind all the time. Instead of getting involved with them, you just watch them as processes coming and going. The breath gives you a spot, a physical spot, that helps keep you grounded.

This way, you begin to see the truth of what's actually going on in the mind. It helps you see through a lot of the fabrications that the mind makes up, the things that can get you excited, the things that can get you upset. You look at their actual reality in the present moment, and there's not much there. They seem so convincing, they seem so real, when you get inside them. But if you see them simply as processes, as fabrications, you get stay outside them and not be pulled in.

It's like driving past a drive-in movie theater at the night. You see images flashing on the screen, and as long as you don't try to follow them and make sense out of them, you see what they are: just a flashing, flashing, flashing there on the screen. You realize you have the choice: You could get involved in the plot of the movie and actually start thinking there are people up there on the screen, but you also realize: Why would you want to do that? Just leave it on the level of flashing, flashing, flashing. The choice is yours. There are times when the thinking processes of the mind are very useful, and you need them in order to function. But there are other times when the mind is just spinning its wheels, churning up all kinds of mud and other stuff. When you see that happen, you realize that's the time to get out. You get up and where do you go? You stay with the breath.

So if you want to see the truth of the mind, you have to be true to the breath. Stick with it all the way in, all the way out, for as long as you can. When you realize that you've slipped off, come back and stick with it again. Show the breath some loyalty. Be true in sticking with it, and you'll start seeing a lot of the truths of the mind that you never saw before. Truths that are really beneficial. Truths that are really useful in pulling you out of your old habits of creating a lot of unnecessary stress and strain and suffering.

It's a simple strategy. It may not be easy, but if you work at it, you find that it's one of best the strategies there is.