

Exercising the Mind

November 4, 2006

Okay, get your body in position. Try to find a stable posture that you can hold for an hour. Place your hands in your lap. Face straight ahead and close your eyes. Try to keep your back comfortably straight. That's getting the body in position.

Then you get the mind into position. We've already started with thoughts of goodwill. "May all beings be happy. And may I be happy." Tell yourself that: "May I be happy. May I find true happiness." Don't be embarrassed to think that. After all, true happiness is not a selfish thing. Because it comes from within, it doesn't have to take anything away from anyone else. So it's not harmful. And only if you can have some measure of happiness inside can you help other people be happy in a genuine way.

This is both for yourself and for the people around you. So the next step is to wish well-being for all beings. May all living beings be happy. And remind yourself: This is why you're meditating—to find true happiness without causing anybody any misery, anybody any harm.

So this is your motivation: universal goodwill. These are good thoughts to think. When the mind is imbued with goodwill, it doesn't wish for anybody's harm. It can let down a lot of its resentments, angers, and other uncomfortable emotions. You can put them aside for the time being. You may not uproot them, but at least you can put them aside. Remind yourself that there's nobody in the world whose suffering would benefit you in any way, so there's no need to wish anyone ill will. When you can maintain that attitude, your mind feels a lot lighter, more spacious. That's the beginning step in getting the mind in position.

The next step is to think about what you've got here in the present moment, these resources you've got that you're going to try to develop for the sake of true happiness. It may not seem like much. You've got the body sitting here, breathing. You've got your mind, thinking and aware. But when you bring those things together, they turn into something more. So think about the breath and be aware of how the breath feels as it comes in, as it goes out. If you want, you can use a meditation word along with the breath, the name *buddho*, which means awake: *Bud-* with the in-breath, *dho* with the out-. Or any word you find helpful.

Once you can stay here with the sensation of the breathing, then you can let the meditation word go. Try to be as sensitive as possible to how the breathing feels. What kind of breathing feels comfortable right now? When you breathe in, what's the point that lets you know you've breathed in enough, you can breathe

out? Similarly, as you breathe out, what's the point, what's the sensation of the body that says, okay, enough out-breathing, now it's time for an in-breath. Try to be sensitive to those turning points. If you want, you can spend the whole hour just focusing on that one issue: How do you know when the breath is comfortable? How do you know when you've breathed enough in one direction or the other?

What we're doing here as we meditate is not just working on the breath. We're also developing the mind. And that's the important part of the meditation: the good qualities you develop as you focus on the breath. The more you exercise mindfulness and alertness, the stronger they get.

It's like going down to the gym and exercising. You may work with the weights, but you're not there because you're really into the weights, it's because you want strength. So you focus on learning how to lift properly or whatever your exercise is, trying to do in a proper form, being very mindful, so you can get the most strength out of the exercise. Then you've got some strength to take home. It's not that you leave the strength there in the locker room.

It's the same with meditation. As you focus on the breath, you're not just learning how to be a good breather, you're learning how to be more mindful, more alert. Those are the inner strengths you want to develop, but you've got to be focused on the breath in order to do that.

And you develop a third quality as well, which is called ardency: You really stick with what you do. Pay a lot of attention. Try to do this well. Try to be quick in noticing, when the mind slips off, why did it slip off? What distracted it? In the beginning, don't analyze it too much. As soon as you sense that the mind has slipped off, just bring it back.

We talked today about the problem of meditating for an hour. You have the luxury of a whole hour, while the mind wants to be free to think whatever it wants to think about. You say, "Okay, I'll settle down by the end of the hour. In the meantime, I can think about this, think about that." And you start getting lazy and sloppy. That doesn't develop the qualities you want. You have to bring an attitude of ardency to what you're doing. As soon as you notice that the mind has slipped off, bring it right back. Slips off again, bring it back again. Don't give up.

It's like training a puppy. You don't want the puppy making messes on the floor, so you have to be strict with it. It's going to rebel. It's not going to be happy. But you have to ask yourself, do you want the puppy to be happy now, or do you want to be miserable with its messes for the rest of your life? You've got to train it.

So have a sense the importance of what you're doing here. If your mind isn't well trained, it can make a mess of everything in your life, no matter what good

things come your way. If you're not mindful and alert, you can actually use those good things to harm yourself. You gain wealth, you gain status, you gain money, you gain praise, and you can kill yourself with those things. In other words, you can kill the goodness of the mind.

So this is the most important thing that you have to work with in your life: the attitude the mind brings to things, the inner qualities it brings to what it's going to do and say and think. For that, you need to be mindful, you need to be alert, to learn from experience what's skillful and what's not. Meditation gives you some basic practice in learning how to do this. What's a comfortable way of breathing right now? Here is something is so close to the mind: the sensation of the breath in the body. Yet do you know when the breath is comfortable? Do you know when it is as comfortable as it could be? If you can't know your own breath, if you can't have a sense of what's a skillful way of breathing and what's not, how are you going to be skillful in other areas?

So even though it may not seem like much, focusing on the breath, you find that it develops a lot of good qualities in the mind. You start with mindfulness, alertness, and ardency, and you start developing concentration and discernment. If you really are ardent at being mindful and alert, the mind is going to start staying more and more consistently with the breath. It can begin to relax with the breath.

All too often, the mind is like a cat that jumps here and jumps there. If it knows it's going to jump, it tenses up. The mind instinctively knows that it moves around so quickly that's almost always tense. It lands on something, and almost as soon as it lands there, it's ready to go someplace else. But when you find that you can stay with the breath more and more consistently, the mind can begin to relax with the breath. It can melt in to the breath. In other words, your awareness begins to seep throughout the whole body, just as your sensation of the breath seeps through the whole body, and you feel more and more at home. You develop a sense of steadiness. That steadiness of mind: That's the beginning of right concentration.

As you develop skill in maintaining that sense of steady but relaxed focus, that's the beginning of discernment. You begin to see what works and what doesn't work: how you can develop that sense of focus, how you can maintain it, how you can destroy it inadvertently. Over time, you develop discernment and knowledge through doing the work of the concentration.

This is an important part of the Buddha's teachings. He doesn't simply want you to memorize words or to deal with concepts. He says that you want the kind of knowledge that comes from doing, i.e., the knowledge that comes from

developing a skill. That knowledge goes deep. It can make changes in your mind, which simply knowing the words or knowing the concepts doesn't necessarily do. In fact, it can't really do. After all, you could replace any concept with another concept, and it's simply a matter of words. It may give you a slightly different perspective on things, but it's not the kind of knowledge that comes with knowing that you've done something and you've suffered from it, or haven't suffered from it, or you've been able to lift a burden from the mind by doing something in a particular way. That kind of knowledge sticks with you. It goes deep.

This is why this simple process of focusing on the breath is closely related to the issue of true happiness. You gain knowledge of mindfulness and alertness by developing them. You gain knowledge of concentration, you gain knowledge about the question of what's skillful and unskillful, by working at these things. Your knowledge becomes skilled knowledge.

In the old days, they used to make a distinction between warrior knowledge and scribe knowledge. Scribes could describe all kinds of things, define words, write about all kinds of things. Whereas with warriors, their knowledge didn't come in terms of definitions. It came more in terms of skills, how you deal with a particular situation, how you can survive a particular situation, how you can win out in a particular situation.

What we're doing as we meditate here is developing warrior knowledge. That doesn't mean that you go out and just attack everything. It means you have a sense of which issues are important to work on and which ones are not, which battles are worth fighting and which ones are not. The battle of training the mind, winning out over greed, anger, and delusion, the qualities that get in the way of mindfulness, alertness and discernment: That's the most important battle in life.

So as you're working with the breath, remind yourself that these are important skills you're developing. And you never know how much time you have to do it. You may think you have a whole hour to meditate, or a whole week here at the monastery, two weeks, whatever, but time can get cut short very easily. Aging, illness, and death don't send messages ahead of time, saying when they're going to come. So you've got this moment right now. Make the most of it. If you get another moment, make the most of that. Keep with it moment by moment by moment. You'll find that the skills you need, the strengths you need, the understanding you need, will develop right here.