

Don't Listen to This Talk

January 4, 2007

Don't listen to this Dharma talk. Focus on your breath, because the Dharma that you want to know is right there at the breath, where the mind and the body meet. You can observe the mind, you can observe the body, you can observe the events that happen in the mind and the body as they're happening. That's the genuine Dharma. The Dharma of words is simply a set of pointers to focus your attention here on the present moment and to remind you of what's worth looking at, to give you some idea of what to do about what's going on. Anything that pulls your attention away from here is not what you want right now. What you want is to observe what's going on in the present moment, to catch the movements of the mind as they're happening.

What are you looking for? Cause and effect. See what things the mind does that lead to happiness, and what things it does that lead to pain. Sometimes you're taught that meditation is a matter of being very passive and accepting, just learning to accept whatever comes up. If you're on a short meditation course, that might be a useful instruction. It helps develop patience and equanimity, which are qualities that we in the modern world lack, so they're useful to develop. But they're not the whole story. You're approaching meditation as a life-long practice. You realize that patience and equanimity are only two of the many skills you'll need to develop in order to see what's going on, to handle what's going on in the proper way. When the Buddha talks about cause and effect, he's not describing a mechanical process. He's asking to look for which causes are skillful, and which are unskillful, to nurture the skillful ones and drop the unskillful ones. It's a learning process. This applies throughout the practice, all across the board.

To observe this, you need not to be just passive. If you were totally passive, you would never learning anything about cause and effect at all. Events would simply just pass by, pass by, pass by, and you wouldn't know what was connected with what. But it is a fact that we can act. We can make choices. We can do things, we can change things. That is what permits us to know cause and effect. For instance, if there's pain in the body, try adjusting the breath to see how it affects the pain. If you don't make any manipulation or any adjustment in the breath at all, you'll have no idea if the breathing is contributing to the pain, or if pain is influencing the breathing, or if they're connected in any way at all. If you change the breath, then you can see, oh, it does or does not have an impact on that pain. It does or does not have an impact on the way you relate to the pain.

This is when adjusting is useful—in fact it's important, it's essential to the practice. It's a set of skills you need to develop.

Then as you get more and more familiar with the meditation, you gain a sense of when it's proper to simply watch, and when it's proper to do something about what you're watching. So don't be afraid to ask questions about the breath, to change the breath a little bit. Ask yourself: What would be a better breath right now? What would be more gratifying? What kind of breathing would feel good in the chest? What kind of breathing would feel good in the abdomen, in the arms, in the legs, out to the hands, out to the feet? What kind of breathing would feel good in the hip? Explore these things. This way you get on familiar terms with what's going on in the present moment. You're focused on the appropriate issues, on what choices are being made right now and what the results of those choices are.

This is called appropriate attention: *yoniso manasikara*. As the Buddha said, appropriate attention is one of the most important factors for inducing Awakening. There are lots of other things you could focus on in the present moment. But the Dharma points you to this question of cause and effect, skillful and unskillful. As for other things, you can let them pass, let them pass, because they're not the issue. This principle applies to any problem. If you clutter up your mind with too many facts—with no clear sense of which facts are really crucial to solving the problem and which ones are not—the fact that you're keeping track of so many things actually obscures the problem.

So you don't want to focus on too much in the present moment. At the same time, if you're totally passive, you never solve anything at all. There's no place where the Buddha says to be totally passive or totally uninvolved with what's going on. In fact, it's actually impossible. As long as you're involved in space and time, there are choices being made in the mind. So you want to learn to get in touch with them to see what those choices are, because a lot of them are buried in subconscious parts of your awareness. You want to be sensitive to what choices are being made and to gain a sense of how they could be more skillful.

Meditation is meant not to limit you, but to expand your range of options, to give you a bigger sense of what is possible, of what you can do. So don't let your hands be tied.

If the breath feels comfortable, learn to maintain it. It's okay to be attached to the breath when it's comfortable. Desire can also be a good thing, when you learn how to be skillful in what you desire. We tend to think that the Buddha said desire serves no other purpose than to cause suffering, but that isn't true. Skillful desire, the desire to be skillful, to let go of unskillful mental states, to develop skillful ones, is actually a part of the path. It comes under the factor of right effort.

Right resolve, another factor of the path, basically comes down to the desires that grow out of an understanding of the four noble truths. You see that your actions and certain ways of thinking lead to suffering and you resolve not to fall into those ways of thinking and acting. That resolve is a type of desire. It's an intention that you want to act on. It's part of the path.

As for attachment, the Buddha says that when you gain a certain level of stillness in the mind, learn how to enjoy and indulge in it. Maximize that level of stillness. It's something to develop, to cultivate. It's not something you simply note and let pass, note and let pass. Anybody can do that. The real skill lies in learning how to develop these things so you can maintain a sense of ease and carry it around with you. That's the duty with regard to the path: You develop it. Any skillful mental state: You want to keep it going, to develop it further. In the course of keeping it going, you learn a lot about the mind, a lot more than you would learn simply by watching things passively.

So focus your attention right here, on what's happening right now. How does the breath feel? When you perceive the breath in different ways, what does that do to the breath? Can a simple thought let the breath be more comfortable? Does that work? Or do you have to push it a little bit physically? Explore. Learn about these things. There are general principles in the practice, but a lot of the specifics are things that you have to observe on your own.

Right in that sort of observing is where you see the Dharma: not here in the talk, but here in the actual movements of the mind, events as they happen in the body, sensations as they arise and pass away in the body: how different mental states have an impact on those sensations, how those sensations have an impact on your mental states. These are the things you want to observe. Settling in with the breath puts you in a good place to observe them, because the breath is basically where the mind and the body meet.

So if you're looking for the Dharma, if you want to hear the Dharma, then listen to what the breath has to say, listen to what the mind has to say, when you explore how events arise and pass away. That's where you begin to see connections, to see the patterns of cause and effect. Then you can learn how to nudge them in a direction where the skillful states tend to flourish, and unskillful states fall away. You can develop a sense of ease simply by the way you relate to the breathing. As you get more skillful, you carry that around with you. When you're carrying around a sense of ease, it's a lot easier to be equanimous, wise, to make the right decisions both in terms of what's happening outside and what's happening inside your mind. A certain level of attachment to that sense of ease is actually part of the path.

Learn how to use these things. They can be your friends. They can give you all sorts of help on the path.

So watch what's going on. Keep your focus right here, right here with the breath. That's where you'll find the true Dharma.