

Training Your Minds

April 10, 2011

Close your eyes and focus on the breath. Take a few deep, long in-and-out breaths and see how the process of breathing feels. And notice where you feel it. What kind of sensations do you have in the body when you breathe in? What kind do you have when you breathe out? Where do you feel the breathing? We're not talking just about the air coming in and out through the nose, but the flow of energy in the body, which you can feel anywhere. But try to notice where it's most pronounced, where it's easiest to follow.

And then notice if it's comfortable. If it is comfortable, stay breathing the same way that you are. If it's not, you can make it longer, shorter, deeper, more shallow, heavier or lighter, faster or slower. Experiment for a while to see how different kinds of breathing feel for the body. And you may notice that the body's needs will change over time, so that what feels good right now may not feel good in another five minutes. So try to keep on top of how the breathing feels.

If you have trouble sticking with the breath, use a meditation word to go along with it. We often use the word *buddho*, which means "awake." That's the quality of mind you're trying to develop: a mind that's awake, that's alert. So think *bud-* with the in-breath, *dho* with the out, *bud-dho*, until you can find that you can stay with the breath. Then you can put the meditation word aside and just be purely with the sensation of the breathing.

The trick is to stay, because the mind has a tendency to wander. That's what the word *samsara* means: wandering-on. It's not so much a place as an activity, something the mind keeps doing. It peeks in and looks around here for a while, and then drops that, and goes over and looks in that corner over there. If you were to make a map of where your mind has been in the course of the day, you'd see that it's all over the place. It would look like the thread in a sewing machine when everything gets all tangled.

And that's a real shame, because the mind is the most important thing in your life. It's what determines what you're going to do, what you're going to say, and what you're going to think. It determines the pleasure and pain that you experience in life. And for most of us, it's totally out of control. You make up your mind in the morning that you're going to do *x*, and then you go around and do not-*x*, or anti-*x*. And you ask yourself why. Well, you forgot. Or other intentions came barging into the mind. It's as if you have more than one mind in there, and in a way, you do: lots of different desires, all of which are aimed at happiness, but a

lot of them are misinformed. You think you gain happiness from wealth, but you try that for a while. Well, wealth has its problems. You try status, but that has its problems. You try popularity, but that has its problems. So you go back to wealth again. Maybe it wasn't so bad after all.

And you keep going back and forth like this: lots of different desires, lots of different senses of even who you are, based on those desires. And the Buddha's basic solution to all this is to tell you that you've got to train your mind. If your mind had one set way of being, one set way of doing things, it couldn't train itself. But, fortunately, because you have all those different senses of "you" in there, each of which is based around a desire, one of your selves can train another one of your selves, can see things that another self didn't see. This is how the mind can train itself. You look at your sense of who you are and you can see that it changes from activity to activity. Sometimes your body is relevant, and the body becomes you. Because you have a sense of control over it, you can identify with it. You can tell it to move its arm, and it moves the arm; to move the leg, and it moves the leg. For the time being, at least, it works. But there are other activities where the body isn't so relevant. They're more purely an internal issue. So you drop any sense of identification with the body and you start identifying with different factors in the mind.

So your sense of who you are depends on what you have to control in order to get the happiness you want. It also depends on who you think is going to be experiencing that happiness: which part of you is going to be experiencing the pleasure of those different activities. So for each desire for happiness there's a "you" who can work on it and a "you" who's going to experience it. If you watch your mind long enough, you'll find that there are lots of different desires for happiness and lots of different senses of "you." The Buddha calls this I-making and my-making. You create your sense of *I* for a particular desire, and a *my*: the things you're going to gain, or the things you're going to be able to control to get that desire. And then either you get it, and that's the end of the issue, or you discover that when you gain it, it wasn't all that great to begin with; or you don't gain it. And so you drop that desire and try to find another one.

So it's no wonder that the mind is such a mass of confusion, because there are so many people in there. They're like a huge committee, with lots of different agendas. So what we're trying to do as we meditate is to find which members of the committee are most skillful, who actually do have the ability to bring about some happiness, a happiness that doesn't have any bad side effects. If your happiness involves the suffering of other people, there are going to be a lot of

problems down the line. So you want to ask yourself: What kind of happiness would not cause other people to suffer?

Well, it is possible to develop a sense of well-being purely from developing your inner resources. That's what we're doing as we meditate. We try to develop our mindfulness, our alertness, concentration, discernment, our sensitivity as to what's really going on in the mind, so that we can train all of the members of the committee to see where true happiness lies, and what we can do to gain it.

Because this is one thing that all the members of the committees have in common: They all want happiness. Some of the members may be more difficult to train than the others, but it's not impossible as long as you realize that the mind is the big factor in life, and if it's going to find any happiness, it's got to be trained. That's one of the basic principles of wisdom. The Buddha said it's what distinguishes a wise person from a fool. The fool doesn't see any need to train the mind, so the fool looks for happiness outside. The wise person realizes: You've got to train the mind so that it doesn't sabotage its own happiness.

So we start with really basic qualities, like mindfulness, alertness, and ardency. Mindfulness means the ability to keep something in mind, like you're trying to keep the breath in mind right now. Try to remember each time you breathe in: Stay with the breath. Each time you breathe out: Stay with the breath. Then you try to remember to do it skillfully, i.e., find a way of breathing that feels really good. Then you develop your alertness, the ability to see what you're actually doing and the results you're actually getting. Are you staying with the breath? When you're focused on the breath, does it feel good, or are you focusing in a way that confines the breath, makes it ill at ease? Okay, try to change your focus.

That's what the third quality is, what the Buddha calls ardency: You're trying to do this skillfully. If you notice that something is not working, well, what can you do to make it work? Sometimes you focus too strongly on one spot and that creates tension there, creates pressure there, and that's unpleasant. So you want to back off a bit, but not so much that you lose the breath. The classic image is of trying to hold a baby chick in your hand. If you hold it too tightly, the chick dies. If you hold it too loosely, it flies away. So you've got to hold it just right. And your sense of "just right" is something you have to develop over time.

But as you work with this, trying to be mindful, trying to be alert, and trying to do this as skillfully as you can, you begin to notice things. And it does become a skill. These qualities of mind become stronger. That way, your unskillful mental states, the unskillful desires, that could slip in when there was a lapse in mindfulness or alertness have fewer and fewer openings to slip in. You can see

them clearly: “Oh, that desire really doesn’t create any happiness. It’s something I may like, but if I look at the long-term results, I really don’t want that after all.”

Now it’s one thing to see that, and another thing to actually drop the desire. This is why we work on developing a sense of ease and well-being with the breath, so that we have a better pleasure to compare. Because for most of us, we do things that we know are unskillful simply because we want that quick hit of a little bit of pleasure right now and we don’t see anything better at the moment. But learning how to focus on the breath in a way that’s comfortable allows you to withstand some of those desires. You realize: “I’ve got something better here right now, it feels good just breathing in, feels good breathing out.” Try to think of that sense of ease spreading throughout the body. Think of the breath, as I said, not just the air coming in and out of the lungs, but as the energy flow in the body.

When the energy flow feels good, think of it moving around the different parts of the body, working through any patterns of tension you may have in your arms, and your shoulders, in your back, in your legs, and any part of your face or your neck. You’ll find, after a while, that it feels really good just sitting here breathing. It’s a sense of pleasure that’s free. You don’t have to spend any money to gain this pleasure, and it’s totally harmless—you’re not harming anybody—and it’s totally yours. Nobody else is going to move in and push you out of the way to watch your breath. Your breath is *your* breath.

So it’s a sense of pleasure that doesn’t involve any conflict, doesn’t involve any harm. As you get more and more used to it, it begins to seep deeper and deeper inside, so that it really is gratifying. Then when the thought comes that you might want to do something based on greed, aversion, or delusion, you say: “Why bother? Needless suffering: Why bother with it?” You’ve got something better.

This is how you train the mind: You develop good qualities that lead to knowledge and you also develop a sense of well-being that can sustain you. That way, the various unskillful members of the committee start getting converted. They begin to realize: This really is good, learning how to develop this sense of well-being inside, simply by sitting here breathing.

And you see that the qualities of mind that you develop can be used in other areas as well. The more mindful you are, the more alert you are, the easier it is to do other things skillfully in life. You make up your mind that you’ve got a specific job you’ve got to do, and it’s a lot easier to stick with it all the way through to the end, to do it well, to do it skillfully.

So there are many advantages to training the mind like this. In fact, it makes all the difference in the world. Everything you do, and say, and think, has an impact on how you experience the world. And if you can train your actions in this way,

the world will seem very different. You cause less suffering for yourself and less suffering for others as well. Because the stronger you are inside, the less you have to lean on other people, the less you have to impose on other people, the less you create burdens for other people.

So it's not as if working on your mind is a selfish activity. You're working on things that other people can't touch, they can't reach in. You may have had this experience: You're with somebody who's really suffering and yet you can't reach into them to help them. A very strong sense of helplessness comes when you realize, "This other person is suffering in a way that I can't touch." You see a baby crying, and no matter what you do, the baby just keeps on crying and crying. Or you see an old person who's demented, and you can't reach that person. Each of us has that inner area that nobody else can reach. And when you're training the mind, you're training that part of yourself so that it can care for itself.

You notice that phrase we had in that chant just now: "May all living beings look after themselves with ease, may I look after myself with ease." It's good for all people to learn how to manage this really deep, inner area of themselves. When you've got that as something that you've mastered, then there's really no suffering deep down inside. And when there's no suffering deep down inside, you're not a burden to yourself, you're not a burden to other people.

So this is why the meditation is a gift: You're taking care of the area where you really are responsible. That's another one of the Buddha's basic definitions of wisdom: that you take care of the area that you really are responsible for and you don't drop that to go meddling into other people's affairs or into things where you're not really responsible. This fact that we have the ability to create either suffering or happiness inside, and the fact that we use that ability to create so much suffering: That's our problem. That's something that we have to work on. Once you solve that problem, you solve all the other problems you're responsible for. Then you have energy left over to help other people—to be, at the very least, a good example for them, or to give them advice so they can work on their inner responsibilities, too.

So see this as your most important task: realizing that all the different senses of "you" that you may have all aim at happiness, and yet so many of them end up causing suffering. You want to do something about that, and you do something about that by training the mind so that all the disparate members of your committee start working together in a way that really does lead to the happiness you want, that all of them want. That's how you stop creating problems and stop suffering from problems.

So it's a simple activity, staying here with the breath. But it has a lot of ramifications—because it's training the most important part of your life: to be wise, to be skillful, to find a happiness that's really true.