

Sensitivity All the Time

Thanissaro Bhikkhu

November, 2002

Try to be present throughout the whole breath, each breath, all the way in, all the way out.

We like to think that if we had it all figured out, we wouldn't have to pay so much attention—that if there were some formula we could memorize, that in itself would take care of things so we wouldn't have to put so much effort into the meditation, put so much effort into being present. We'd like just to plug into the formula and let things go on automatic pilot—but that's missing the point. The point is being attentive, paying careful attention, being sensitive, all the time.

This is a quality the Buddha calls *citta*: intentness, attentiveness, really giving yourself fully to what you're doing right now. When you're intent, insight comes not as a formula that allows you to be inattentive, but as a sensitivity to what's going on right now so you can *read* what's happening, continually. In other words, you're trying to strengthen this quality of being attentive, this quality of being present, because when you're really present you don't need all the other formulas. You recognize the signs of what's going on: when the breath is too long, when the breath is too short, when the breath energy in the body is too sluggish, when it's too active. Being attentive is what enables you to notice these things, to be sensitive to them, to read what they're telling you.

So the insights you gain are not necessarily wise sayings that you can write down in little books of wisdom. Insight is a greater and greater sensitivity to what's going on. Don't think that you'd like to have things explained beforehand, or to sit here trying to come up with little rules or memory aids: "Well, when this happens, you should do this; and then, when that happens, you should do that." You're trying to develop the quality of being able to listen, able to read what's happening in the present moment, all the time, so that you won't need those memory aids.

If you're looking for the little formulas or the little nuggets of wisdom that you can wrap up and take home, in hopes that they'll allow you to drop the effort that goes into being so attentive, it's like the old story of the goose laying the golden egg. You get a golden egg and then you kill the goose. That's the end of the eggs. The goose here is the ability to stay attentive, to be present, to be fully engaged in what's happening with the breath. The insights will come on their own—you keep producing, producing, producing the insights—not for the

sake of taking home with you, but for the sake of using them right here, right now. You don't have to be afraid that you're not going to remember them for the next time. If you're really attentive, your sensitivity will produce the fresh insights you need next time. It will keep developing, becoming an ability to read things more and more carefully, more and more precisely, so that you won't have to memorize insights from the past. It will keep serving them up, hot and fresh.

Like sailing a boat: When you first get out in the boat and they give you the rudder, it doesn't take long before you flip the boat over because you steer too hard to the right, steer too hard to the left. You don't have a sense of what's just right. But if you pay attention to what you're doing, after a while that sense of "just right" develops. And the next time you get into the boat, it's not that you have to remember any verbal lessons you learned from the last time. The sensitivity is there in you: the ability to read how much pressure you should put on the rudder at this point, ... when this happens, ... when that happens. There's a greater and greater familiarity that comes from being fully attentive.

The same principle applies here. It's not the case that you're going to be fully attentive for five minutes and learn whatever lessons you're going to need for the hour and then just zone out or go on automatic pilot. You have to be as attentive to the first breath as you are to the last breath, as attentive to the last breath as you are to the first, and all the breaths in between. As this quality of attentiveness grows stronger, your sensitivity grows stronger. There's less and less of a conscious effort, but it doesn't mean that you're less present. It's just that you're more skilled at being present, more skilled at being sensitive, ready to learn whatever lessons there are to learn.

Michaelangelo at the age of 87 reportedly said that he was still learning how to sculpt. Well, that should be your attitude as you meditate. There are always things to learn. Even arahants have things to learn. They've learned enough already to overcome their defilements, but they're still learning other things because they're attentive all the time. They're watching what's going on. Their sensitivity has been heightened.

When people talk about the path being identical with the goal, there *is* an element of truth there, in the sense that when you reach the goal you don't throw away all the things you did when you were on the path. The texts say that even arahants practice the four foundations of mindfulness, not because they have anything more to do in terms of uprooting their defilements, but because the practice of mindfulness provides a pleasant abiding in the here and now. It's a good place to be. At the same time, if they have to teach other people, they use the sensitivities they've developed in their meditation and apply them to the process of teaching.

So don't sit here saying, "Well, I'll just stay with the breath until I get the results I want, and then I can stop this effort." You're working with the qualities that are going to take you there and that are going to stay with you once you arrive: the qualities of mindfulness, alertness, discernment—all the good qualities we're working on here. You want to bring them more and more to bear on what you're doing in every situation. They get stronger and stronger, and they give you the sensitivity you need to cut through any defilements you encounter. They give you the sensitivity you need to find more stable states of concentration, to figure out the techniques you need in order to get the mind to settle down when it's obstreperous.

But again, once you've learned those lessons, it's not the case that you can turn off the effort to be sensitive, the effort to be fully engaged. It's just that you learn how to be more and more comfortable being engaged, so that whatever lessons come up, whatever things you have to read within yourself, whatever things you have to listen to within yourself, you're ready to listen. You're alert to the signs that you have to decipher when you read.

So do what you can to keep this goose alive and well so it can keep laying the golden eggs you need. You crack open the golden egg and there's a lesson for you to use right there, right then. You don't have to worry about making a stockpile of golden eggs, because it's a funny kind of gold, like the gold in a fairy tale. You turn around, and a few minutes later it's turned into feathers or straw. But if you're really attentive, the goose is ready to lay another golden egg. So keep nourishing it, tending to it, so that it can keep producing. Use the eggs for their intended purpose and then just let them go. Do your best to keep this mind-state going so that it's ready to lay another egg, to give you more gold all the time.