

Decisions

June 2003

Someone once asked where your focus should be when you practice: on the present moment or on a future goal? And the answer is both. In other words, you focus on the present moment with a purpose of shaping it to attain a future goal. The goals we have need to be implemented in the present moment for them to stay with us, for them to really make a difference in our lives.

So as we're meditating here, the question is: What do we focus on here?

First you sit and focus on your breath. Be aware of the breath coming in, aware of the breath going out. Be aware of when the mind is with the breath and when it's wandering away. If it wanders away, bring it back. If it wanders away again, bring it back again. And be aware of the quality of the breathing. If the breathing is uncomfortable, you can make it more comfortable.

In other words, there are things to *do* here in the present moment. It's not that we simply sit here and *be* in the present. The whole purpose of focusing on the present is to see exactly how much we already do in the present moment, and how we can do it better. The habits of the way we relate to the present moment also color our whole life. The way we relate to other things, the way we relate to other people, other issues, come out of *here*. So if we straighten things out here in the present moment very immediately in how we relate to the breath, how we relate to movements of the mind, it's going to have ramifications that spread out to how we relate to other people, now and into the future.

So what you focus on in the present moment is doing the most skillful thing you can do right now. That's your focus. That's your goal. If you sense the mind wandering away from the breath, remember that that's not what's wanted right now. Any thinking that helps you keep with the breath is actually skillful thinking. So we're not trying to ban all thought, just the thoughts that are irrelevant to the task at hand or get in the way of the task at hand. That task is to get the mind to be as stable and clear as possible in the present moment so that you can see even more clearly what you're doing.

It's a process of developing sensitivity. The more you watch the movements of the mind and the breath, the more familiar they become. As they become more familiar you start seeing subtleties you missed before.

This is why the goal also requires time. If total skillfulness were something you could create in one moment, it'd be great. But that's not the way skills mature. You keep working at watching the breath in this present moment and then this present moment, because you don't have anything else but present moments to work with. The past you can't change. The future that hasn't come

yet. So you work right here, you try to develop good habits right here, by making the right choices right now.

While we meditate, we try to keep the choices down to a bare minimum: Just stay with the breath. Anything that pulls you toward the breath, makes the breath clearer, or makes it easier to settle down with the breath, that's fine. Anything else, just let go. It's all pretty clear-cut.

The problem is that our intentions are not yet clear-cut. It's as if we have a committee inside. Or as someone once said, the mind is like a lot of different modules. When this particular task comes up, this module gets into the act. If another task comes up, another module gets into the act. All these different roles that the mind is ready to play, and after a while it gets bored with this particular role or gets dissatisfied for some reason or other, so it's going to try to put on a new role, create a new module, and go someplace else. It's tired of hanging around the house and wants to dress up and go outside to someplace new.

But you've got to remind it that there's real work to be done, and the real work gets done right here. Real happiness, once this work is done, will come right here, too: the kind of happiness that comes from having mastered a skill or from being in the process of mastering a skill, getting better and better at seeing what's going on. There's a sense of accomplishment, a sense of self-worth that comes when you know these things, see them first hand right here right now, and know how to deal with them more and more skillfully.

Dogen, the Zen master, made the point that we're not aiming at a particular goal separate from the practice; the goal is in the practice. This doesn't mean there's no distinction between the path and the goal, simply that you focus your full attention on the path and that's what gets you to the goal. You don't have two separate things you've got to focus on here. You focus on being skillful right now, and that in and of itself makes the goal clearer, brings it closer.

So keep your focus right here. Keep your attention right here. You're not simply going through the motions, hoping that by doing it in a more or less mechanical way the goal will come. It's not something you do on automatic pilot. You have to focus totally right here, totally right at the breath.

This is important because the breath is something we usually do leave to automatic pilot. We let the body take care of the breathing while we've got other things we've got to worry about. But the whole basis of the connection between body and mind is right here at the breath. The reason we're able to act in any way at all, to speak, to think, depends on the breath. So the breath is the foundation for all of our activity. As we get with the breath, we're staying with that foundation to understand how these activities arise: at what point they become skillful and at what point they become unskillful and where we can

put some better input into them. It's not that the mind arises out of the breath. Many times the mind influences the breath, but everything comes together right here. So we want to focus right here where everything is brought together. That way you see all kinds of things all at once.

When you think in this way, it helps you realize how you don't have to save anything back for the future. Just give everything to the present moment. What you're doing right here right now is important because you get to see your intentions clearly as they happen.

Someone once complained that this focus on being skillful in your intentions is a distraction, that all you have to do is open up to the deathless that's waiting all around us right here in the present moment, ready for us to acknowledge it, and that's all we have to do.

I think I've told this story before. The young guy who made this complaint was at a retreat with his girlfriend, and watching him interact with his girlfriend you thought that he of all the people on the retreat needed to take to heart most the teaching on learning how to be skillful, how not to harm other people or himself. But he wasn't interested.

It's important to see the importance of your intentions, of your choices in the present moment because those are the things that hide what lies on the other side of the present moment. Yet we can't get past these things simply by dropping them. We have to understand them, we have to work through them, make them more and more refined. Because it's in these moments of present intention that we can be really most fully present to the processes of the mind, and that we touch what's on the other side of those processes.

So there's nowhere else you have to look. Everything that's going to open up is going to open up right here. And it's not going to open up on its own. You have to induce it to open, to take things apart.

Remember the Thai idiom for what where doing right here is literally "making an effort"—*tham khwaam phien*, they say. There's an effort that goes into being clear about your intentions but it's an effort well-spent. It's not an effort that gets in the way, that distracts you, that wastes your strength. Because it's right here that all the important decisions are going to be made.

Even if you don't get all the way to nibbana in this lifetime, at least you've learned to clean up your life, to be careful about your intentions. Because these are the factors that shape your life, and right here is where it's being shaped. Past actions, past intentions: Those are already shaped. You can't do anything about them. As for future ones, you can't determine anything about how they'll be handled except through developing good habits right here and now.

We have to realize the importance of our choices as we make them because they really do shape our lives and the lives of the people around us. So we want to bring as much mindfulness and alertness to them as we can, so that they're

well-shaped, as skillfully shaped as we can make them.

Some people would like to have iron-clad guidance on how to make the right decisions all the time, because they're afraid of making mistakes. But everybody will have to make mistakes in this practice: it's simply a question of being able to make the determination to learn from your mistakes, and not to repeat them—that's crucial. You don't have to be upset about past mistakes or feel guilty about them. Just look at them as learning experiences and resolve not to repeat them. That's the best that can be expected of any human being.

So this is why we meditate in the present moment, trying to bring the mind into the present moment, because everything important in our lives is happening in the present moment. If you want happiness on the level of the world, it's going to be created right here. If you want happiness that transcends any and all worlds, it's going to be learned right here by observing right here these intentions we have right now.

Right now we're trying to train our intentions so that they stay with the breath, so that they're clear. The decisions we make right now are clear-cut. Either you stay with the breath or wander off. When you're with the breath, you try to make it comfortable. That cuts away a lot of complications. When things are simplified like this, it's a lot easier to be confident in your decisions. And this gives you a basis of solidity from which you can start looking at other decisions that are less clear-cut. They may require more sensitivity. But they will benefit from the added strength of mindfulness and alertness that we're developing right now. It's in the doing that the goal is attained.

You can see this in the structure of the four noble truths. The Buddha talks about the duty with regard to the second noble truth, which is the cause of suffering. He says you let it go. And what is the cessation of suffering? It's precisely that: the letting-go of the cause of suffering, the letting-go of craving. But that truth also has a duty, which is that you want to verify it. So you have to be very clear about what you're doing. You let go and you have to know what you're doing. Which is why the path that we're following is a combination of two types of factors: factors that let go and factors that develop our powers of awareness. And it's in the doing of the path that all the other tasks of the other noble truths all get taken care of.

So you find that when you understand what you're doing, that this is a very important process here because it contains the seeds of all the different factors of the path. You're trying to be as alert to the breath as possible and letting go of all your distractions, and alert to the letting-go and to its results. That's the basic pattern of the whole path: the developing of alertness and other qualities that make the mind more and more clear about its actions, and focusing on how we let go of everything that gets in the way.

That way, the decisions that we make in our lives, whether they're day-to-

day decisions or meditation decisions, are made more and more skillfully, with less and less harm to ourselves and the people around us. They all come out of this same process of being very clear about what you're doing in the present moment and having a good sense of the consequences of your actions.

This is the process that gets more and more refined all the time simply by focusing clearly right here at what you're doing right here. And it's through focusing right here that the focus carries through to the goal at the end of the path, when the work is done, when the skill has been mastered. But you don't master the skill in anyplace else besides doing it right here right now with as much clarity, persistence, and ingenuity as you can muster.

In other words, bring everything together right here. Boil everything down to what you're doing right here, right now. And the more undivided you can make your attention right here, the more you'll see.