

Take the One Seat

November 22, 2012

I was reading a guide to breath meditation tonight. The author's recommendations were that if you focus on the breath, you shouldn't try to control it, but if you find yourself controlling the breath, don't try to control the controlling. And that was the point when I put the book down.

The mind, by nature, acts. Every time you breathe in, breathe out, there's an intentional element there. Every time you look at anything, listen to anything, smell, taste, touch, think about things, there's always an intentional element. In the practice, there has to be an intentional element, too. And you have to be very upfront about it. If you don't want to control the breath or control the controlling, you put yourself in a real bind. If the ideal is that you're going to be totally passive or totally receptive, it gets more and more difficult to practice. If you're upfront about the fact that, yes, this is a doing, this is an activity, then you can watch: When you focus this way, what are the results? When you focus that way, what are the results? When you breathe this way, when you breathe that way, what are the results? You learn by doing and observing. And if something doesn't come out well, you turn around and do it again, changing things a little bit. You get to watch the mind in action.

This is probably the most important skill you need as a meditator: watching your own mind as it's making choices, and then looking at the results. When you can watch that, you can begin to gain a sense of what works and what doesn't work, what's skillful and what's not, where the different pains and sufferings you're dealing with come from. Then you can do something about them.

Because the problem is the fact that the mind is constantly creating trouble for itself. The trouble isn't out there in other people, situations outside. I mean, those are troublesome enough, but the real trouble is the trouble the mind makes for itself. It'll take things outside and bring them in to compound the trouble. But the trouble is right here.

Now, the solution is not to do nothing at all. Because even the choice not to do anything is a kind of doing, and in the meantime, you don't learn any skills. Because as long as the mind is going to be making choices, you want to teach it to make skillful choices. And you do that by watching it.

Getting the mind into concentration is a very good way of learning how to watch it. You need mindfulness to stitch together your moments of awareness, moments of attention, so that they become continuous. Mindfulness is the ability

to remember you've got to stay with the breath. Alertness is what watches the breath. And as you settle down with the breath, you notice there are a lot of other things right next to the breath: all the activities of the mind.

Ajaan Chah has a nice image. He says it's as if you have a room. There's one chair in the room, and you sit in the chair. Other things will come in, and you watch them. But you don't let them sit in the chair. I was reading someone's interpretation of this passage where they said: It's basically just a matter of sitting and watching the grand show. No, it's not watching the grand show. You're making sure that nobody else comes in and takes your chair. Then you can watch them and figure out what's happening, what the mind is doing that's skillful, that's not skillful, and what you can do about it. If greed comes in and takes over the chair, or if grief comes in and takes over the chair, or anger, or any of the other emotions: If they take over the chair, then you're down on the floor. Or if there's a squabble over who gets to sit in the chair, you're not an observer anymore. So you stay right here and don't let anybody push you out of the chair—or lure you out of the chair.

There's a group of famous stories in Thailand about Sri Thanonchai, the Thai trickster. He was famous for playing tricks on the king, usually involving puns. But my favorite story of the group is one that involves no pun at all. Sri Thanonchai is down at the river; the king is standing on the bank. And the king has had enough of these tricks that Sri Thanonchai has been playing on him. He says, "You think you're so smart, but there's nothing you can do to get me to go down into the river." Sri Thanonchai stops and thinks for a minute and then says, "You know you're right. But if you were down in the river, I could make you get out." And the king says, "Oh yeah?" And goes down into the river. Then he stands there and says: "Okay, what are you going to do to make me get out of the river?" Sri Thanonchai says, "Well, I got you down into the river already. Whether you get out or not is your own business."

This is the way it is so often with our mind. We think we're going to meditate, but something comes along and lures us off the chair. So don't fall for the tricks the mind can play on you. If something else claims to be more important, or whatever the trick may be the mind has to play on you, don't leave the chair. You want to stay there so you can watch. You're in the position of power. That's what it means to be in the chair, not that you're just watching the show. You're exerting your intention to be watching these things and not to get pulled into their games. You've got your purpose in being here, which is to understand what's going on, so that you can do it more skillfully.

Otherwise, the mind, left to its own devices, can create huge amounts of suffering. You sit around with nothing else to do and you can think up all kinds of horrible stories about the past or the future. And then you burn yourself with them. What does that accomplish? Nothing at all. We all want happiness and, for some reason, we take our ability to shape our experience and we shape it in the wrong way, away from happiness. That's what you want to watch.

One way of knowing how you're shaping it the wrong way is to try very intentionally to shape it in a skillful way. In some cases, you'll find that it's easy; in others, it's hard. Okay, when you know it's hard, that's when you've run up against something. So it's not a reason to be disheartened. You've actually found something important; the mind has a habit you haven't been watching carefully enough, that you're not alert enough to. You have to be able to stand back and watch the mind in action. You figure out: "What is this obstacle? What am I letting get in the way of the practice?"

In many ways, we have a really ideal place to practice here. There are little irritants, but the problems is that, for most of us, we don't let them stay little. We can make them huge, to the point where you can't stay here anymore. So you've got to step back and watch the mind's habits.

And it's useful to have a sense of humor about this. This ability to step back is actually very directly related to humor, because a sense of humor comes from what? The ability to step back from a situation and see what's ironic or paradoxical about it, what about it doesn't make sense. All too often, when you're in a situation, you don't see the larger pattern. This is why really wise people have a really wise sense of humor. Not silly or vicious, the way most people's senses of humor are. Why is it wise? Because they can step back from their own actions and see the irony in the fact that here they are trying to create happiness, and they're creating suffering very earnestly.

So when you take this chair, the one chair in the room, sitting back and watching things, be very careful that your thoughts don't move in and push you out of the chair or lure you out of the chair. That way, you can watch them in action and figure out: "What exactly am I doing here? Where's the misunderstanding? What is the link that I'm not seeing that's causing me to create suffering? Why do I find it so delicious? Why do I find it so entertaining to create suffering?" That's what you've got to look for.

And, as I said, one of the best ways of seeing these things is by trying to do something else: doing something you know is meant to create genuine happiness. This is why we have a path. This is why we have instructions on the qualities to develop on the path, so that you have something to measure the other actions in

your mind against. Being on the path is what pulls you back from your ordinary habits. There's a lot of energy in the mind that resists. It can find reasons why right concentration, or right mindfulness, or right effort, or whatever, is not really right for you.

It's only when you begin to realize that the path is the standard, and your old habits are the things that are meant to be called into question: That's when you're firmly in the one seat. You can understand the path intellectually, but you have to actually see it when you're holding on very tightly to an old habit in spite of your understanding. When you can see that in action, that's when you're really making progress: when you're putting the mind in the right position for putting an end to its ignorance.

So it's not a matter of doing nothing. There's a lot that you have to do in the meditation. And even though, in the beginning, you may not be doing it all that skillfully, the fact that you're doing it and you *know* you're doing it, is what allows you to develop the skill. The mind is active, and your discernment has to be active as well, in order to outsmart all your active old habits.