

The Current News

March 18, 2019

I had a student once who told me that his version of checking the morning news was to go out into his garden and check on what was growing, what was blooming, what was dying. And I had to tell him that even that was too far afield.

The important news is what's going on in your mind right now: What are you doing? What are you saying? What are you thinking? Why? What's the motivation? This is the news that's really important for us, because it's what we're responsible for.

And yet all too often, we don't exercise our full responsibility here. We go pay attention to other things. We let the news of the world outside coming through the media invade our attention, to the point where we really don't know what we're doing or why.

So it's good when you meditate to remind yourself that this is the news you should be current with: Each time the breath comes in, what are you doing? Each time the breath goes out, what are you doing? Are you with the breath or are you someplace else? If there's something coming up in the mind, do you see it clearly? Here's an area where you can exercise some power, some control.

There's so much that comes in the news outside over which we have no control at all. And it's frustrating to have knowledge about things we can't do anything about.

On top of that, we let ourselves get worked up about the news of other people. What we should be getting worked up about is the fact that greed, aversion, and delusion are taking charge of our own mind. And we're not doing anything about it, or our efforts are kind of half-hearted. You want to give full attention to what's happening right here, because right here is where you're responsible, and this is where you can make a difference.

As you sit here focusing on the breath, you can ask yourself: What would be the best way to breathe right now? Unlike the news outside, this isn't anything you can discuss as a topic of conversation with your friends: "I had a really great breath last night." But it is important for your internal well-being right now.

Because the mind needs a place in the present moment where it can settle down. If it's going to see itself clearly, it has to stay anchored in the present. The breath is good for that, both because it is always in the present moment—there is no future breath, no past breath that you can watch right now—and because you can make the breath comfortable. That helps the mind be willing to stay here.

If there's a sense of ease in the body, try to spread it around. Think of it filling the whole body. Think of the breath bathing the body and of the good energy filling the body along with the breath. When we talk about the breath being full, it's not a matter of lots of air in your lungs. It's more a sense of fullness in your blood vessels, fullness in your nerves. And that's a feeling you want to be able to maintain, even as you're breathing out. It may give rise to a sense of floating. And as long as that feels good, keep it up.

When you're with the breath, you don't just stop there. You ask yourself: What's going on in the mind? You don't try to stir things up, but just keep an eye out for it. This is what alertness is for, to be not only with the breath but also with the mind. That way, if anything's going to come in and invade, you see it. And you begin to see the stages by which you get involved in the thought and how the thought goes out into a desire to do something. It's something you want to see, because the mind plays a lot of tricks on itself as it's going from just a stirring in the mind to a decision to do something. All too often, those things are totally hidden from us because we've got our attention someplace else.

Someone once told me that her approach to watching the news was always to ask, "Someone wants me to believe this. Why?" In other words, you have to bring a sense of skepticism, you have to wonder about the motives and agendas of other people. And you can never really know. Well, you've got to bring the same attitude toward your own motivations. "Something inside me says to do this." Well, why? Here's something you can actually *can* know, where you can look into your motivation. What is the agenda? Is it an agenda you'd like to continue with? This way, the news is current, and you're on top of something where you can make a change. That's the most useful news of all.

The Buddha once said that his test for anything that he would say would be threefold: Is it true? Is it beneficial? And is this the right time and place? And you can apply those same questions to your thoughts. Something comes in: Is this true? If it's not true, why bother? And when you say that's it's true, based on what do you think it's true?

So much of the news is hearsay. It may be guaranteed from many different sources, but it's still something you just hear about, it's just a report. And yet we base so many of our opinions on reports like that. But as the Buddha points out, there's so little you can really trust in reports. They may be right, they may be wrong, but you don't really know.

But the truth that you see while you meditate is the truth of what's going on in your mind, whether it's giving rise to pleasure or pain: That's something you can trust a lot more. But even then if something's true, that's not enough. The next

question is: Is it beneficial? In other words, can you do something useful with that knowledge? Something that really is for your benefit and for the benefit of others?

Then finally, is this the right time and the right place? You could spend the hour thinking about lots of good things you could do tomorrow—which could be true and beneficial, but this is not the right time. Now you've got the opportunity to get the mind really quiet, so that you can see clearly inside what's going on. Take the opportunity while you've got it.

The Buddha's image for seeing things clearly is that it's like standing by a clear pool of water where you can see the fish moving around, and you know which fish is doing what because the water is so clear. Well, that's the clarity you want to have in your mind. And yet for so many of us our minds are not a clear pool of water. They're all pretty murky. Every now and then something seems to show its head out of the murk, but the question is: What lies further down into the murk? You've got to clear out the water.

You do this by looking at your actions. When you do something, look at the intention beforehand; look at the action while you're doing it, see what results you're getting while you're doing it; and then look the results over the long term.

Now to do the long term requires not only clarity but also mindfulness: the ability to remember what you did. This is one of the reasons why we practice not only just being with the present moment but developing mindfulness *and* alertness *and* ardency: keeping in mind the lessons we've learned from the past as to what's useful and what's not, being alert to what's actually going on, and trying to do this as best we can.

Is your mind staying with the breath or is it wandering off? If it's wandering off, bring it back. That's part of the ardency. While you're with the breath, the ardency tries to be as sensitive as possible to how the breathing feels and how the mind's relating to the breath.

When you bring all these qualities to bear, that clears out the water so you can see clearly what's going on.

We hear about the unconscious or the subconscious as if it were a separate room in the mind. But actually it's simply actions that are happening in the mind but we're not paying attention to them.

So as meditators we want to be investigative reporters, to look into what's actually going on, to see how many layers there are in your intentions and which ones you can trust. These are things that you *can* learn, skills that you *can* master. It's an area of your experience where you *can* make a difference for sure. You're the one in charge. In fact, you're the only one who knows how you feel the mind from within, how you feel your breath from within.

So here's your chance to make your eyewitness report to the people who are responsible for making changes. And try to cultivate the desire that you really want to make the changes for the good. You want to be as skillful as possible in what you do, able to rely on yourself as much as you can.

Because all those reports that come from the world outside, they may be interesting right now, but as you get older, as death approaches, they're not going to be able to do much for you at all. The skills you've learned in watching your own mind: *Those* are the things that will come in handy, that will really help you, so that whatever thought or emotion flares up in the mind, you know how to handle it—because you've learned the skill *now*, because you've been on top of things *now*. You've paid careful attention to the news inside your mind *right now*.

So when death becomes something happening right now, or a very strong pain becomes something happening right now, you won't be in unfamiliar territory. You'll know the area because you've watched it, and you've dug down to see what's really going on right here. That means you'll be in a position of strength, the strength that comes from being current with what you're doing and what the results are. Because it's through those two things that everything else you know in the world gets filtered.

So be very clear about how you engage with your senses, how you make up your mind to do or say or think something. Because everything else you know gets filtered through those decisions. And when you're clear here, everything important becomes clear.