

A Good Place to Stay

September 2, 2012

Each time you meditate, survey your body and survey your mind. As for the body, are you sitting straight? Do you feel balanced? You don't have to be ramrod straight, but at least try to have your spine in alignment. If you're sitting cross-legged, sometimes have your right leg on top and sometimes your left. That way, you balance out the effect of the long hours of sitting. Have your hands in your lap close to your stomach to help keep you erect. Face forward and close your eyes.

Now survey your mind. Are you ready to settle down? Try focusing on the breath for a while as it comes in and goes out, and see if you find it easy to stay here. If there's some discomfort in the body, there are two ways you can treat it. One is to think of the breath energy going through that part of the body and loosening things up. If that doesn't work, then just don't pay any attention to that part of the body. Pay attention to the parts that you *can* make comfortable through the breath.

If you have trouble staying with the breath, ask yourself, are there any leftover thoughts from the day that are impinging on your mind and keep getting in the way? If there are, stop and think about them for a minute. How useful are these thoughts? Are they thoughts that you really want to get involved with?

Every kind of thinking has an antidote. So if you're thinking with anger about what somebody did or somebody said, try to have some goodwill for yourself. Remind yourself that this is not helping you, getting worked up about other people's actions. After all, their actions are their karma. They have the perfect right to do anything, think anything, and say anything they want. They may hold you in contempt, but they've got the right to do that. Whether it's right or not, you don't have to settle that issue.

Remind yourself that you don't have to make your mind depend on other people's opinions. You don't have to make your sense of self-worth depend on other people's opinions. You're here to train yourself, and that's a good thing. You're in the midst of doing something really worthwhile. So don't let thoughts of this sort get in the way.

If there are thoughts of lust or sensual desire, remind yourself that whatever it is you're feeling desire for is going to deteriorate—sometimes in some really disgusting ways. In the meantime, in order to gain that object or that pleasure, you may be doing some pretty unskillful things. If so, what are you left with? On the

one hand, you have a disgusting object and two, some bad karma. Do you really want that?

In other words, whatever the thought that's pulling you away, try to think of a way around it. Think of an antidote until you can agree that you don't want to go there. Then come back to the breath. There still may be some random thoughts coming through the mind, but you don't have to pay them any attention because they don't destroy the breath. The breath is still here. It's just a question of which part of your awareness you want to tune into. It's like a radio. If you tune into a rock station, it's going to rattle your nerves.

Right now, we want to tune into some easy listening, something comfortable and easeful. There are thoughts about meditating, and then there are thoughts about the actual object you're going to meditate on. That's the breath. And then there's the breath itself. Try to bring all those together to begin with.

After a while, you find that the thoughts about the breath, you can drop. Just be with the sensation of the breath coming in and going out. Notice where you feel it, and notice how it feels. If it feels comfortable, stick with that rhythm of breathing. If it doesn't feel comfortable, you can change. You can try a couple of good, long, deep in-and-out breaths. See how that feels. See if it feels nourishing and refreshing. And as long as it does, keep it up. When it doesn't feel so refreshing anymore, then you can let things calm down.

But as soon as the breath gets calm and comfortable, you've got to expand your sense of awareness to fill the body. Otherwise, you'll start drifting off. The mind is used to drifting off when the breath gets comfortable because that's basically how you fall asleep. Here we want to be still and comfortable, but not asleep. We actually want to be wide awake. So try to think of the whole body.

Or you can expand your awareness bit by bit through the body. If you're focused on the area around the heart, then expand your awareness to fill the whole chest. From the whole chest, then include the abdomen, and from the abdomen, down into the hips and down your legs. Then from the chest, you can expand out the arms, up into the head. The broader you can do this, the better. But if you find that you can't maintain that broad level of awareness, try focusing on just one part of the body. But try to be very, very sensitive to that part of the body.

There's a quality called ardency that you want to bring to the practice, and you employ it in two ways. If you find the mind slipping off to something else, you very quickly try to bring it back. Once it's back, you try to be very sensitive to the breath and try to breathe in as comfortable a way as possible, as a reward for coming back. As you get more sensitive to the breath, it becomes a mirror for the mind. You can begin to see thoughts as they're just beginning to appear. You

notice them as a little stirring in one part of the breath energy in the body, and then a perception gets slapped onto it: “This is a thought about this; that’s a thought about that.” And then you go running off.

You want to catch that before you’ve run off. So, anyplace where there are little stirrings in the breath, try to disperse them. Think of everything being smooth. It’s like a knot in your hair; you comb it out so there’s no knot anymore. These little knots of energy in the body: You want to comb them out before they turn into something really distracting.

In this way, you take your survey of the body and your survey of the mind, and bring them together, right at the breath, because the breath is where the mind and the body meet. It’s the aspect of the body that’s closest to the mind. Your primary experience of the body is breath, although we tend to look past it into other aspects of the body. But the breath is the first thing we contact. It’s also the most sensitive to the movements of the mind. This is why it’s a good place to stay.

There are lots of good reasons for staying here. When you’re with the breath, you know you’re in the present moment. This is where you get to observe the mind. If you’re here with a comfortable sensation of breath, working and playing with the breath—in other words, if you’re experimenting and learning to enjoy the experimentation—it gives rise to a sense of comfort and engagement in the present moment.

So this helps your concentration. You also find that it helps your virtue. A lot of times, we do unskillful things because there’s a thirst for pleasure “of any kind, right now.” That’s what the mind says, and then we end up doing unskillful things to please it. Well, here the breath is giving you a sense of ease you can tap into. Whenever you feel tempted to break one of your precepts, notice where you’re feeling patterns of tension in the body, and then allow the breath energy to soothe those areas of the body. That’ll take a lot of the edge off the temptation.

Working with the breath also helps your discernment because you’re right here, right next to the mind so that you can see what’s happening. If you keep the mind with a comfortable breath, you put it in a good mood. That, too, is an important part of gaining discernment into the mind. If the mind’s in a foul mood, it’s not going to want to listen to your discernment because, basically, what discernment’s going to see is areas you’ve been making mistakes—your bad habits, especially your bad mental habits. And very few of us like to admit our bad mental habits. We’ll do anything to protect our way, saying, “I’m perfectly fine; the problem is with other people.” As Ajaan Maha Boowa once said, we like to take the mud inside our own minds and sling it around on everybody else.

So if you're in a bad mood, you're not going to want to hear about the fact that this is your habit. But if working with the breath can get you in a good mood, then it's a lot easier to admit to yourself, "Yeah, I do have these unskillful habits. I can see them. I can see the pain they cause." That's another way the breath helps: As you get a greater and greater sense of ease in the body, more subtle patterns of tension and more subtle patterns of stress in the mind appear more clearly.

But most importantly, working with the breath helps you see the extent to which your mind does shape its own experience. The Buddha calls this fabrication. The reason we suffer is because we fabricate our experience out of ignorance. One of the ways we do that is through the way we breathe. Some people wonder why we work with the breath. Shouldn't we just kind of let it come in and go out on its own so you can see its true nature without any interference? But part of its true nature is that it's responsive to your intentions and that you use the breath as a way of shaping your experience. So learn how to use it well.

As you're engaged with the breath, you're engaged not only with what's called physical fabrication, but also verbal fabrication. You're directing your thoughts to the breath, and you're evaluating it. You're talking to yourself about the breath. This is your internal conversation. This gets right here at the breath, too, so you can watch that in action.

Finally, there are perceptions—the mental labels you place on things either as words or as mental pictures. You'll notice that to stay with the breath, you have to have some kind of mental picture, some kind of mental label to act as an anchor. How do you picture the process of the breath to yourself? Are there ways of picturing it that make the breath more comfortable, that allow it to come in and seep through the whole body?

Some ways of conceiving the breath just have air coming in and out of the lungs through the nose, and that's it. But that doesn't allow you to be sensitive to other aspects of the breath. Think of the breath as energy that runs along the nerves, runs along the blood vessels. There are areas of still energy in the body as well. Ajaan Lee talks about one of them being centered right at the spot where the diaphragm meets the rib cage. When the mind really settles down, you can notice that and other still spots, and you can think of spreading that still energy out through the body, so that even though the breath is coming in and going out, there's a sense of real stillness everywhere.

Your perceptions can have a huge impact on how you experience the present moment. As you work with the breath in this way, you begin to see very clearly that this is how you shape your experience, giving rise to feelings of pleasure. Or if you want to, you can focus on feelings of pain and work with them. There's a lot

to work with here in the present moment. All of this helps you with your discernment.

So the breath helps with virtue, concentration, and discernment. That's why it's so central to the path. So remind yourself this is a good place to stay—a good place to work and a good place to play. It's like an advertisement for a town or a community. Well, it's your inside community. All these elements in the body, all the thoughts in the mind: You want to bring them all together so that they live together in peace. As you do that, you find that a lot of insight can come just from the beginning stages of the practice. This is how tranquility and insight work together. You put these things together, and they form the path. As you stay with this, the path can grow.

As I was saying earlier in the day, all too often, the mind—after a long while—finally settles down, and then you immediately want to know, “What's the next stage?” Well, the next stage is staying here, maintaining this and letting it ripen, letting it mature.

It's like the fruit on the end of a twig. You notice that the fruit's there, but it's still unripe. And you say, “Well, how do we ripen this? Where do we put it so that it ripens?” And all too often, we just pick it off the end of the twig and take it someplace else so it will ripen better. But that puts an end to its ability to ripen properly. It's going to ripen best right here, right where it is.

In the same way, bring all these things together—the mind, the breath, and the body—and they'll develop.

So there are lots of reasons why this is a good place to stay