

Your Gyroscope

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Bring your awareness to the breath. Think about the breath and then notice where you feel the breath—not just the air coming in and out of the lungs, through the nose, but any place in the body where there's a sensation that corresponds to the breathing: the rise and fall of the abdomen, the rise and fall of the chest, the more subtle feelings you may feel in your neck, your head, your shoulders, your back, your arms and legs. Any place where you clearly notice a sense of energy, be aware of that.

And try to establish a sense of balance: What kind of breathing feels right? What kind of breathing is too long? What kind of breathing is too short? What kind of breathing is just right—just long enough, just short enough? The same with deep and shallow, heavy and light, broad and narrow. Experiment to see what brings the breath into balance—and brings the mind into balance with the breath, so that you're not clamping down on it too hard and, at the same time, not holding it too loosely.

The classic image is of a person holding a baby bird in his hand. If you hold it a little too tight, the bird is going to die. Too loose, and the bird will fly away. So try to bring things into a sense of “just right,” a sense of balance, and see what you can do to maintain that balance. If things come up in the mind, what can you do not to get swept away by them? You stay right where you are. It's like being in a ship out in the ocean. The waves rise and the waves fall, but if your ship has a good gyroscope, the ship doesn't lose its balance.

This principle is important. The practice is not only a matter of what you do while you're sitting here, but also as you take your practice out in the outside world. Because the world has its waves. There's material gain and there's material loss; status, loss of status; praise and criticism; pleasure and pain. These things rise and fall, rise and fall, like waves. And some of them are rogue waves. They come with a huge rise in the water. Sometimes they're more gentle. But sometimes even gentle waves can knock you over and drown you if you're not careful.

So you want to have a sense of a gyroscope inside, something that helps keep you on an even keel. Part of this is just the physical sense of having a good center inside, a center you maintain wherever you go. It might be in the middle of your chest, it might be in your head—any place where you can maintain a sense that the body is here, and your awareness is here, and the awareness isn't too tight. The blood is flowing easily; you're not tensing up around your center. As for whatever sense of ease there is in your center, think of it spreading out from there. Then just try to maintain that sense of center. That's one kind of gyroscope you can carry into your dealings with other people, wherever your encounters are. Try to maintain that physical sense of center as steadily as you can, so you don't get knocked over by the waves of what the other person might be saying, or how you're reacting to that person. Whatever comes up, you try to maintain this balance inside.

It's important to maintain this, both for your sake and for the other person's sake. There's another classic image in the Canon of two acrobats on the top end of a bamboo pole set vertically into the ground. The question is: Should they look after each other or should each look after him or herself? And the answer is that you each look after yourself, maintaining your balance. You can't maintain the other person's balance, but the more steadily you maintain your balance, the easier it is for other people to maintain their balance around you.

So think of this physical sense of center—where the breath energy is good and you constantly tend to it—as your gyroscope.

But you need more than just that. You also need to understand about the ways of the world, and the importance of maintaining your state of mind as something solid in the midst of the world. Otherwise, even though you may have some skill in maintaining your physical sense of inner balance, old ideas and old values

can come welling up. If you have nothing to fend them off, your gyroscope will get knocked off kilter and you'll get washed away.

This is why reflecting on the eight ways of the world is a helpful practice. What does the world have to offer? Just those eight things: material gain, material loss, status, loss of status, praise, criticism, pleasure, pain. That's it. And what is there of any lasting value in any of these things? The only value is if you find a way to do good, say, with your gain or your status, and to learn lessons from your loss. Keep reminding yourself: This is the way the world is. Things come. Things go. When they come and go, remind yourself that they really weren't yours to begin with anyhow. When you go around flaunting your gains, you're like a man going around with borrowed goods, getting his pleasure and sense of self-esteem out of things that belong to other people. But the owners have the right to take their things back at any time.

That's the way the world is. Look at your money: It doesn't have your name on it. Even on your credit card, the name of the bank is bigger than your name. It's more important than your name. And the bank can call their credit card back if they want. It's not really yours.

So if you're looking for pleasure and satisfaction outside, you're looking in the wrong place, because none of these things really belong to you. Even your own body doesn't really belong to you. You can use it for the time being but then you have to send it back. In the mean time, while you have it, you want to make the best use of it, so that you can get something of permanent value or lasting value out of it to take with you when you go.

So it's not the pleasure of having these things, it's the goodness you do with them: That's what really matters. When you learn to be generous with material things, that becomes a quality of generosity in the mind. When you use your status to help other people, that becomes a quality of compassion. The qualities you develop are the only things that really stay with you, even past death.

When you meet with praise and criticism, you can develop the wisdom of looking at what other people say, looking at their intentions, and looking at yourself. After all, sometimes criticism is very useful. As the Buddha once said, if someone points out your faults, you should regard that person as having pointed out a treasure. In other words, if the faults really are genuine faults, you've learned something—because our faults are very hard for us to see. We tend to hide them in places where we know we're not going to look. Only if you see your faults clearly can you work with them and develop good qualities in their place. That's a genuine treasure. And when people praise you, remember it's their way of encouraging you, not just to stay where you are but to get better, to keep on being good.

As for pleasure and pain, there are many different kinds of pleasure. You want to learn how to find pleasure that's not intoxicating, that doesn't blur your mind's vision when you look for the real source of pleasure inside. As for pain, the Buddha said this is an excellent way of learning the noble truths. The first noble truth is stress: the stress that comes from craving, the stress that comes from clinging. When you find the mind suffering from pain, you ask yourself, "Where is the cause of that suffering?" It's not so much in the physical pain. It's in the clinging and craving within the mind. That's where you want to look.

When you adjust your understanding in this way, then when these waves of the world go up and down, you can learn from both the ups and from the downs. That's when you're safe. And your gyroscope won't get easily knocked off kilter. You'll be able to maintain your balance.

So your protection is both the concentration and the discernment working together. This helps you to maintain your sense of balance, so that things that used to knock you over don't knock you over anymore. The waves come past, and they just go past. You stay upright as things go up and as things go down. That's the skill you want to take with you. You can't take the monastery with you. You can't fold it in a little package and take it home, spread it out and surround yourself with it. But you can take the skills you've been developing here. Try to maintain that center as you get up from where you're sitting in meditation, as you walk around, when you go to sleep. Try to stay with that sense of the center until you drift off. When you wake up, that should be your first question: Where is my center? Establish that before anything else, and then think about what you

have to do next.

The wisdom lies in giving priority to your gyroscope inside, so that none of the waves of the world can knock you off course.