

Ardent, Alert, & Mindful

April 1, 2012

Try to gather all your thoughts, all your awareness, right here at the breath. Take a couple of good, long deep in-and-out breaths to gain a sense of the feeling of the breath in the body. Notice where you sense it. Where do you feel it? In your chest? In your head? In the abdomen? We're talking less about the air coming in and out of the lungs and more about the feeling of motion, the feeling of energy that brings the air in and lets it go out. When you sense that movement of energy clearly, let your awareness settle right there, wherever it may be clearest. And allow it to be comfortable. Try not to put too much pressure on it. You do want to stay here, so it's going to require a little bit of pressure in your focus. But you don't want the pressure to be so strong that it gets in the way of the flow of the blood in your body or makes you tense.

Allow the breath some freedom. The mind simply keeps track of what's happening. If you find that your thoughts are wandering off, just bring them right back. The more quickly you can catch yourself getting distracted, the more quickly you can bring your attention back, the better. Sometimes people ask how can you measure progress in your meditation, and that's one of the ways: learning how to catch the mind as quickly as possible. Ideally you can catch it before it goes. There may be a little bit of boredom or a little bit of dis-ease in the present moment and the mind is beginning to look for someplace else to go: You want to catch it at that stage. Then immediately breathe in a way that's more interesting. Many times the mind wanders away because of boredom. It doesn't see anything really interesting here with the breath. And that's largely because you're not sensitive enough yet. The more sensitive you become to the process of breathing, the more you begin to notice: There are a lot of things going on here.

The energy flow in the body goes in lots of different directions. Sometimes it works together in harmony and sometimes at cross-purposes. When it's at cross-purposes, it's unpleasant to be in the present moment and the mind immediately looks for somewhere else to go. If you can see that that's the problem, then just hold that thought in the mind. Have all the parts of the body breathe in together, breathe out together.

This flow of energy is not just around the torso or in the head. It affects all the nervous system, all the way out to the tips of your fingers, all the way out to the tips of your toes.

You're basically developing three qualities of mind here. First there's mindfulness, which means keeping something in mind. In other words, right now you're keeping in mind your original intention to stay with the breath. Then you want to have access to the various things you've learned in the past about staying with the breath: what kind of breathing the body likes when you're tired, what kind it likes when you're nervous, what kind of breathing gives you energy, what kind of breathing saps your energy, what kind of breathing helps the mind to settle down with a very strong sense of being solidly here.

These are things you want to observe. That's what the second quality is all about: alertness, watching what's actually going on, watching what you're doing, and seeing that kind of results you're getting.

The mindfulness and alertness have to work together. The more alert you are in the present moment, then the more you'll be able to remember in terms of your repertoire of approaches, your repertoire of tools. So you can learn how to do this more and more skillfully.

That relates to the third quality, which is ardency: the effort you put into doing this as skillfully as you can. Part of ardency involves desire, the desire to do this well. But of course the desire on its own is not going to help you. You need to have the quality of observation. You need wisdom to learn how to focus your desire. And here you're focusing it on the causes for the results we want. We're here, not because we want the breath, but because we want peace of mind. But it turns out that peace of mind is helped a great deal by learning how to breathe with awareness. Breathe with alertness. Breathe with all your sensitivity.

One of the Buddha's analyses of the causes of suffering starts with ignorance. And ignorance is not just a general delusion, it's more precise. Ignorance means you're not looking at things in terms of the four noble truths. In other words, you don't understand what stress is, you don't understand what its cause is, you don't understand the possibility of putting an end to the stress by putting an end to the cause, you don't know the strategies, the path that the Buddha taught for doing that. Or if you do know those things you're not using them. You're not really looking at things in those terms.

For example with the breath you could say part of the reason you're not staying here is because there's a sense of dis-ease in the breath. Or you're not happy with the breath. You want something else as a topic. So you look into the potential cause. And the potential cause might be that you have a craving for something else. You want some entertainment right now or you want some diversion. Or you just want to dose off. Well, that desire is getting in the way. So you have to learn how to put an end to that desire by working on the path.

This means reminding yourself why you're here, what you really want. You want something more than just a pleasant moment or two. You'd like to really understand why there is suffering in your life, and what you can do to put an end to it. And so if thoughts of sensual pleasure come up, you learn how to put them aside. If thoughts of ill-will for this person or that person come up, you put those aside as well. You replace them with thoughts of goodwill. And so on down the line, with all the factors of the path.

So then you bring this kind of knowledge—that you really do want to put an end to suffering—and you apply that to your breathing. In the very beginning level it's simply a matter of learning how to breathe comfortably. As you get deeper into the practice you start noticing how the mind is acting around the breath. It's like when you were a child and were first learning how to throw a ball. You had the ball in your hand and you just saw where you wanted it to go and you were focused totally on where you wanted it to go and you weren't paying attention very much to how you were throwing. Then you realized that that wasn't working. So you had to become more and more sensitive: What's my hand doing right now? What's my arm doing right now? How about my shoulder? You got more and more sensitive to the process of throwing, and you got better and better at it. The same with the meditation: You start by noticing the breath. In the beginning that's hard enough, just watching the breath. But as you're with the breath, you begin to notice that there are feelings around the breath. There are all the different decisions you're making around the breath, what your mind is doing around the breath. And the more you get sensitive to these other factors, the easier it is to stay settled.

All of this comes under ardency, the desire to do it well.

These three qualities of ardency, alertness, and mindfulness relate to the three different time frames. Mindfulness helps you tap into your memories of the past and what memories are relevant in the practice right now. And the primary memory, of course, is that you want to remember to stay with the breath. You made that intention at the beginning of the hour and you want to remember that. You don't want to forget. If something comes up that's not quite right, then you want to remember what you've done in the past that did work, so you can apply it.

Alertness focuses on the present, what's actually going on right now. What are you doing? What are the results of what you're doing?

Ardency relates both to the present and into the future. You really want to be serious about staying focused here because you have a goal in mind: that desire to really understand suffering and learn how to get beyond it. You want to shape things well now so that they'll be in better shape in the future, all the way to the goal. That's what keeps you here, keeps you going into the next moment and the next. So even though our primary focus is on the present moment, we're related to all three time frames through these three qualities of mindfulness, alertness, and ardency.

This is how the meditation makes sense. Because sometimes the question comes up in the mind: Why are you doing this, focusing on the breath? What can you learn when you focus on the breath? But then you remember that you can learn a lot by doing this. After all, what was the Buddha focused on, on the night of his awakening? He started out with the breath. What's the difference between his breath and your breath? The breath itself is not different in any way. The difference was in the qualities of mind that he brought to it. That's what was different. Then you remember that you can develop those qualities too. As he said, it wasn't that he was some special god or something who had come down out of the sky. He simply developed qualities of ardency, alertness, resolution, heedfulness: things that we can all develop.

And what did he gain? He gained true happiness. Would you like some of that? Yes.

So even though you're not finding it right here, right now, if you keep paying careful attention right here, right now, there will come a time in the future when right here, right now will open up.

So even though we're trying to block out distractions that would pull us to the past and the future, we do want to tap into the parts of the past and the future that are useful so that we can settle down and find a sense of well-being, a sense of purpose in being here, an understanding of what we want to look for. We want to look for what the mind is doing under the power of ignorance and try to bring more knowledge to it. And all this begins with the breath.

As the Buddha said, one of the causes of stress and suffering is that you breathe in an ignorant way. It may sound strange, but it's one of the factors that leads to stress and suffering. If you're not paying attention to the breath, you're not fully in the present moment. And if you're not fully in the present moment, there are a lot of other things that are going to go on in the mind that you're not seeing, either. So take this opportunity to really look carefully at the breath and develop these qualities of mindfulness, alertness, ardency as you work with the breath.

You'll find that there really is a lot going on here that's of a lot of interest. It's really important what we're doing right here, right now. You're learning about your own mind—learning how it's causing suffering and how you can train it so that it doesn't cause suffering any more.

And what could be more interesting than that?