

A Committed Relationship

October 20, 2010

When we meditate, we're trying to establish a good relationship between the mind and the breath: a relationship of harmony, trust; one where both sides benefit.

It's very much like establishing a relationship with another person. And so it's useful to think about what the Buddha has to say about developing good relations with another person, and to see where we can apply those lessons to the issue of being on good terms with the breath.

One of the blessings that we chant in the morning, the *Sangaha-vatthu*, is from a sutta where the Buddha talks about how a family can stay together, how people can stay together on good terms. And he lists four basic qualities: generosity, kind words, genuine helpfulness, and consistency. Those are precisely the things we need in the meditation.

To begin with, when you meditate you have to give of yourself. All too many people come to meditation thinking, "Well, what can I get out of this?"—without remembering that the good things in life can come only when you're willing to give. You have to give your time, you have to give your energy, you have to put a lot of thought and pay a lot of attention into what you're doing. You can't just be taking all the time.

This also means making sacrifices. You have to sacrifice the time that you could have been devoting to something else.

And as you're focusing on the breath, learning how to meditate, you have to make some other sacrifices in life as well. It's the same as when you're having a relationship with another person. You've got to give up some aspects of your relationships with other people. If you really want to get to know the breath, you have to give up your infatuation with sights, sounds, smells, tastes, tactile sensations, and ideas.—all those sensualists in the mind that you like to hang around with all the time. Instead, you're hanging around with the breath.

In the beginning, the breath may seem very boring. There's not much there: there's in and there's out—at least that's how it seems when you start out. But as you devote more and more time to the breath, you realize that your new friend has some surprises. There's a lot more going on here. There's the whole issue of breath energy in the body and how it relates to the other properties: the water property, the earth property, the fire property in the body.

To know this takes time. And you have to be very observant to get to know the breath. These are all things you have to give to the meditation, in the same way that you have to give time to a relationship to a person outside, and to be observant of that person. Because it's only when you're giving these things to the relationship that it will thrive.

In a sense, the mind has to be generous with itself, too. You have to remember that it's going to take time to adjust. The mind has a lot of old habits that are going to take time to be reworked, redirected. And so you can't let yourself get too frustrated over the mind's

recalcitrance. You have to give it some space as well.

This is where the kind words come in. You learn how to encourage yourself, especially when things get difficult or seem to be long. You've got to give yourself words of encouragement to keep your morale up. This doesn't mean, of course, being a Pollyanna, blind to the problems in the mind. When there are problems in the mind, you recognize them, and you learn how to speak to the mind in a way that's encouraging, that really gives you the energy to practice.

Now, this will depend on your own psychology as to what works: what kind of encouragement works and what kind of encouragement makes you lazy. That you have to work out. And even though there are times when you have to point out to the mind a lot of its really unskillful habits, you find that it works best when the mind is basically in a good mood.

This is one of the reasons why we practice concentration to begin with. The mind is a lot more likely to admit to its defilements and the fact that they *are* defilements when it has a sense of well-being. You don't want your criticisms to be just one more case of your dumping on yourself.

It's like speaking to another person when you have something harsh or critical to say: You try to find the right time, the right place, show them some respect even though you're being critical. Try to get them in as good and receptive a mood as possible. Because even though the criticisms may be harsh, the fact that you're showing them some respect makes the words kind. They go down a lot more easily.

The same with the mind: When things are difficult in the meditation, don't let yourself get frustrated, don't start yelling at yourself and saying that you're hopeless. Find ways to encourage yourself. And if you're going to be critical, be critical of yourself in a supportive way.

Being genuinely helpful: That's another quality that keeps a relationship going. And it keeps your relationship with the breath going, as well. You really explore what the body needs in terms of breath energy. This is one of those areas where you have to pay careful attention: What does the body actually need? We can go into the breathing with a lot of preconceived notions about what the breath does and how it moves and where it goes. And you're going to have to learn some things anew, to see what really is useful for the breath and what really is useful for the mind. This requires a lot of exploration, a lot of observation on your part.

Some people find that they have an instinctive like for the in-breath as opposed to the out-breath. It's funny but it happens. Or it might be the other way around: Some people prefer the out-breath to the in-breath. If you find that happening, you're also going to find that you're doing some damage to your health. Sometimes you have a tendency to squeeze the breath at the end to demarcate the in-breath from the out-breath so you can be very clearly aware of where one begins and the other ends. That can have a bad effect on the body. It's better to think of the breath as one continuous property where the line between the in-breath and the out-breath can be blurred. You don't try to force any artificial clarity on it by squeezing it or pulling

it out. That's just one issue that might come up.

In other words, in order to find out what's genuinely helpful, you have to really pay attention to what the breath needs, to what the body needs, to what the mind needs as well. Because sometimes a certain type of breathing may feel good for the body but the mind has trouble staying with it, in which case you've got to change. Other times a kind of breathing may feel good—especially the very gentle subtle breathing may feel good—but the body's getting starved of oxygen.

I found years ago when I was suffering from migraines that really deep long in-breaths—even to the point of discomfort as you suck the breath in, suck the breath in—really did help with the migraines.

So this means that you have to learn how to study what's actually beneficial. Sometimes the easy, smooth path is not the beneficial path. That's a point to keep in mind.

The fourth quality the Buddha calls consistency. It basically comes down to commitment. You're really going to stick it out. You're here for the long-term. That means that you have to develop the virtues of being long-term: determination, patience, equanimity, truthfulness. Once you make up your mind you're going to do something, you really do it.

That's what truthfulness means. It's not just a matter of telling the truth. It also means being true to the decisions you've made, the determinations you've made.

As for patience and contentment: You have to figure out what things you're going to be patient with and what are the things you're not. And basically what it comes down to is this: If there's something beyond your control, you have to develop patience and tolerance.

As for unskillful thoughts coming up in the mind, the Buddha says not to tolerate them. Don't be patient with them. Try to undercut them, try to remove them from the mind if you can—with the same sense of urgency as if your head were on fire.

This parallels with contentment. You learn to content yourself with what you've got in terms of material things, but you never let yourself rest content with whatever level of skill you have as long as there's more work to be done.

Similarly with equanimity: We need equanimity in order to deal with difficult situations, but you don't want to be equanimous about everything that comes along, "You know, the mind isn't getting concentrated, well, I'll be equanimous about it. Greed has moved in: I'll be equanimous about it."

Well, that doesn't work. When things outside aren't going well, the Buddha doesn't say to replace them with more pleasant things outside or an I-don't-care equanimity. He says to remind yourself that the real work, the real problem is inside. Replace householder grief with what he calls renunciate grief. In other words, when the situation outside is bad, you remind yourself that the real problem is not the situation outside. It's the fact that you still have work to be done inside. That's why you're suffering. So that's a case where you just can't be equanimous about everything.

This doesn't mean that when situations aren't going well outside that the other person may not be at fault. But the question is, do you want to suffer? And if you don't want to suffer, you've got to turn around and ask yourself what you're doing that's unskillful.

We're not here to sort out who's right and who's wrong. There is no last judgment in Buddhism because there's no beginning point in time. How could you ever keep score or keep tally when, as the Buddha says, you can't find a beginning point? It makes sense to keep tally only when there's a beginning point and you can say, "Okay, since day x this person did wrong x number of times, that person did wrong y number of times." That's because you have a line where the comparisons begin. But here we don't have that. So it's not a question of deciding who's right and who's wrong, who's to blame and who's not. The question is, do you want to suffer or not?

The same situation applies inside as well. When things aren't going well, you can't just simply be equanimous about it. You've got to ask yourself, "What's going wrong here? What's the mistake? What's the problem that I haven't understood yet?" And work on that.

This is how you stay committed to your relationship with the breath, in the course of which you're going to discover that there are things you have to give up and other things you have to do: things that you really like that you have to give up, and things you don't want to do that you have to do—as in any relationship.

This is where discernment comes in. It enables you to stay with your commitment here to the breath. For example, it's very easy when the mind gets concentrated to say, "Well, that's enough concentration. Now I can move on to something else." But you have to remember, you need this skill in all sorts of situations.

This is where the recollection of death comes in as something very useful. If you stay concentrated only as long as you need for getting a sense of refreshment and then let it go to wander off to something else, you're not going to develop the power of concentration you'll need to withstand pain, withstand illness, withstand all the other difficulties that come as you get older, as you get sick, as you approach death.

Which means that when you're sitting here and you've developed a strong enough sense of well-being, you don't just let go and wander off. You've either got to stay in concentration or you've got to figure out, "What can I do that's going to give rise to more insight here? What issues do I still have?"

In other words, there's a task to be done here. We're not just here for a sense of well-being in the present moment. We practice this for more mindfulness and alertness. We practice this for more discernment. We practice this in order to keep improving, strengthening the mind, giving the mind more power, so that it can maintain its concentration not only when the situation is relatively ideal as it right now—when everything's quiet and supportive—but also when things are a lot more difficult. You want to be able to maintain that same sense of purpose, that same sense of focus.

So there's work to be done. We're not here just for the pleasure of the concentration. We're here because the concentration gives us a framework, a foundation where we can do really serious work on the mind. This is why we have to be committed to the concentration.

So whatever ingenuity you can develop in order to remind yourself of why you have to do things that you may not want to do at the moment; or why you have to give up things that you would like to do: That ingenuity is an aspect of discernment. And an important one. We're not here just to learn about emptiness or not-self or more abstract teachings. We're here to figure out, "Why does the mind keep creating suffering for itself? How can we train it so that it doesn't? How can we get past our unskillful habits?" That requires commitment.

Think of this as a long-term relationship, one where you have to give. You're going to gain a lot from it but you also have to give in order to get that level of happiness, the level of peace, the level of well-being you want in return. It requires that you be attentive, that you know how to encourage the mind, keep it on track, so that you and the breath become fast friends.

Then, from now until the time when you breathe your last breath, you'll be helpful to each other. Ultimately you do have to let go of the breath, but you want to do it on good terms.

The same as with any relationship: There comes a point where the relationship has to end. But you want to make sure that both sides have benefitted. And if you've maintained this sense of commitment and truthfulness, then when the relationship ends, there's no regret.