

Shaping the Present

February 22, 2014

Bring your attention to the breath and notice where you feel it as you breathe in and breathe out. Do you like the way it feels? If you do, keep on breathing that way. If you don't, you can change.

This is one of the most important principles in the practice, one that gets overlooked or ignored or even denied: that you have a role in shaping your experience and that the path is learning how to shape it well. So take an active approach. If you're not sure whether the breath is comfortable enough, play with it for a while. Don't put pressure on it, just think "longer," and it gets longer. Think "shorter," and it gets shorter. Then compare how the long breathing and the short breathing feel. Which do you prefer? You can try the same approach with deeper and more shallow, heavier and lighter, faster and slower.

Get a sense of how you really do shape your experience right now. You're already shaping it willy-nilly anyway. In fact, that's the cause of suffering: that we shape our experience in ignorance. The path is all about shaping it with knowledge—being very clear about what you're doing and the results that you're getting, and then using a quality the Buddha called ardency: trying to do it well. That was how he gained awakening himself and that's how we gain awakening in his footsteps. Mindfulness is for keeping this in mind: the fact that you do shape things. Don't forget that. Alertness is for watching what you're doing and the results that you're getting. So you put these three qualities together: mindfulness, alertness, ardency.

It's interesting that when the Buddha lists them in his instructions for mindfulness, he puts "ardent" first. In other words, keep trying to do it well, and keep that desire in the forefront.

If you're not sure what's well and what's not well, you can experiment for a while. This requires bringing a number of qualities into being in the mind, or rather, developing ones that are already there but are not strong enough yet. The Buddha gives a list of seven, called the seven factors for awakening. Establishing mindfulness is the first one, and the one that's always useful. Then there's a set of three that are useful when the mind is sluggish, so that you can give it more energy. And then there are three that are useful when the mind is too energetic, when its energy is frenetic, keeping you from settling down.

The three for calming the mind are: calm, concentration, and equanimity. Those are the qualities that you need to develop when the mind is not willing to settle down. This is one of the reasons why we're working with the breath. You're trying to calm it down so that the mind can let go of some of the tension around any greed, anger, aversion, jealousy, fear—whatever unskillful emotions are keeping the mind from settling down. We work with the breath here because often the problem is not so much with the mental side, but with the physical side, which aggravates things. When you're angry, you breathe in a way that's irritating, and that, of

course, makes you even more irritated. When there's fear, you breathe in a way that actually increases your fear because your body seems to be out of control. So here you try to reclaim your breath, become sensitive to how the breath is feeling, and then try to calm it down.

Realize that you do have a role in this. You have some choices you can make. Try to choose to breathe in a way that's going to calm the mind down, soothe the mind, bring it into concentration.

As for equanimity, that deals with two things. Any thoughts come up with regard to the world outside, you want to be equanimous toward them right now. In other words, you don't get involved; just leave them there. They're not what you want right now. Then, as the mind gets deeper and deeper into concentration, you find that there's less you have to do in order to urge the concentration on or to strengthen the concentration. So your touch here can be more equanimous as well. Just be at peace with what's coming up.

But that doesn't mean that if unskillful things come up, you're at peace with them. You basically bring the mind to a point where everything settles down and doesn't require much extra work so that you can be at peace.

However, these calming qualities are not always desirable, because sometimes the mind just gets very sluggish or it goes into denial or you begin drifting off and don't know where you are—what some of the forest ajaans called “delusion concentration.” You're still; everything's quiet; everything's comfortable, but you're not really clear about where you are. You come out and sometimes ask yourself, “Was I awake? Was I asleep?” That's not what we want here.

We want the mind to be alert. For that, you have to use the more active qualities. The first one is called analysis of qualities, in which you try to figure out what the mind is doing that's skillful and what it's doing that's not skillful. The other two are persistence and then rapture. Persistence is when you try to do things really skillfully. It's that quality of ardency again. And specifically you learn how to motivate yourself to stick with things. If you find that you're feeling sluggish, if nothing really seems to be working or nothing seems to be getting you up in the morning, you've got to sit there and analyze, “Okay, what's the problem?” For example, right now if things start getting sluggish in the mind, what can you do to give yourself a little bit more energy? Exactly which part of the body is feeling sluggish? Which part of the mind is feeling sluggish? What is it resisting?

You want to analyze the problem a bit, to see exactly where it is. What's causing it? This, after all, is how the Buddha learned how to solve the problem of suffering—the unnecessary stress and suffering we add onto our experience. He looked at what he was doing. “What am I doing?” and “What are the results I'm getting?” Those were the questions he asked;

And then, “Are the results good? If they're not good, what's the problem? What am I doing that's getting these results?” “Can I change it?” This questioning requires that you use some ingenuity and that you keep yourself motivated in this direction. Sometimes in the meditation, the thinking that's required really does involve pep talks. You can either warn

yourself about the dangers that come from having an untrained mind, or you can encourage yourself, reminding yourself that you're showing compassion for yourself as you meditate.

You're doing something skillful here. It's good for you. It's good for the people around you. It's good all around. And the more skillful you get at it, the more you'll benefit from it—and the more other people will benefit from it as well.

Or you can think about the inspiring example of people who've tread the path before you: the forest ajaans, famous monks and nuns from the Buddha's time. Many of them went through lots of difficulties. Sometimes their difficulties were worse than the ones you have right now. And yet, they were able to overcome them and actually become awakened people. Thinking about that can give you a sense of being inspired.

So, it's not that you don't think when you meditate. If you find that the mind has a problem and is out of balance, you've got to think your way through the problem—figure out what the problem is; analyze things. And if you need a pep talk, you give yourself a pep talk.

Now, when right effort begins to get skillful, it does give rise to a sense of what the Buddha calls *pīti* in Pali, which is normally translated as “rapture.” It can also be translated as “refreshment.” There's a sense of energy in the body, a sense of fullness and well-being. You really do feel refreshed as you sit here, and that gives you the energy you need to raise the level of the mind—to gladden the mind as the texts say.

So those are the activating factors.

Your duty right now is to look at what you've got right here, right now. If things seem to be in balance, learn how to maintain the balance. If they're not in balance, you've got to either figure out how to calm things down or how to raise the energy of your practice. This is all based on one of the Buddha's discoveries on the night of his awakening, which is that we do play a role in shaping our experience.

Sometimes you hear about how your experience is shaped by past kamma. But actually, it's not just your past kamma. If it were just your past kamma, you'd be doomed. You wouldn't be able to do anything about it right now. Whatever you've done is done and you'd just have to sit here and simply receive the results. But that's not the way the Buddha taught. There are things you're doing right now that shape how you choose out of your field of seeds and plants here. The image the Buddha gives to explain kamma is of a field filled with seeds and some of the seeds are ready to sprout. How you water them—in other words, what you do to them right now—will determine which seeds are going to sprout right now. So you do have a range of choices. And if you do this in ignorance, watering the wrong seeds, there's going to be suffering. So bring knowledge to help you figure out: “Okay, this way of focusing on the breath; this way of thinking about the present moment; this way of thinking about what I'm doing is actually going to lead to good results.” If that's the case, you foster that.

So to be mindful, to meditate, it's not just a matter of just accepting what's there. If you want to speak in the terms of acceptance, what you should be accepting is the fact that you're

playing a role in shaping this, so you want to shape it well. Look at the way you perceive the breath. In other words, what labels do you place on the breath? How do you visualize the breath to yourself? Ajaan Lee, one of the forest masters, talks about breath energy flowing throughout the body. After all, the air coming in and out of the lungs doesn't come in and out on its own. There's energy in the body that brings it in and allows it to go out. Where do you feel that flow of energy? That's the breath you want to be in touch with now. That kind of breath can permeate the whole body. It can permeate it with a sense of well-being as you develop skill. So take advantage of the fact that you are shaping your experience. Do it with knowledge, and it becomes a path.

The ultimate goal is something that's totally unshaped and unfabricated, but to get there, you've got to learn how to shape the path well. If it involves calming things down, learn how to breathe in a way that calms you down. Learn how to think about the breath in a way that calms the breath to soothe the body and take some of the edge of the irritation off of whatever may be going on in the mind. That way you can look more clearly at the mind and figure out which choices in the mind you want to listen to, which ones you have to ignore, which ones you have to argue with in order to get the mind to be willing to settle down.

If your energy level is too low, what can you do to bring it back up? Analyze the problem. Speak to yourself in whatever ways are required to motivate you to keep at it, keep at it, realizing that this work you're doing really is important. This is the way you get out of the suffering that you're otherwise causing yourself. A lot of that suffering often spills over into other people as well. So what can you do to put an end to that? This is only way: training the mind. Because that too is one of the Buddha's important discoveries: that you shape your experience from the inside.

If suffering were something that could be cured, say, by a chemical from outside, or by somebody else coming in to help you, that would be one thing. But the fact is that you're suffering from your own lack of skill, and the only way to solve the problem is to develop your skills. Nobody else can develop them for you. We get help from outside in terms of advice, but the actual work is something you have to do yourself. And fortunately, the mind is capable of doing that. It can be clear about what it's doing, and about the results of what it's doing. It can learn from its mistakes.

But to develop that clarity, you really do have to master these skills of concentration so that the mind can be in a balanced, still, solid place here in the present moment and see things for what they are: see potentials for where they are and where they're going. That way you can develop the good potentials and learn how to starve the bad potentials so that they don't take over. When you take responsibility for your actions, you take responsibility for your experience. That's when there's hope.