

Fixing the Present

October 7, 2108

When the Buddha taught breath meditation to his son, he started out by saying, “Make your mind like earth.” When people say disgusting things to you, or you pick up what they say, think of earth. People throw disgusting things on earth and it doesn’t react. People throw nice things on the earth and it doesn’t react.

You want to develop that same quality of mind, not only with regard to what other people do or say, but also with regard to what’s going on in your meditation, so that you can see things clearly and not immediately run with your first reaction.

That’s an important point because the meditation instructions don’t stop there with non-reactivity. In fact, when the Buddha gets into the different steps for breath meditation, he has you get quite proactive.

Try to breathe in a way where there’s a sense of well-being in the body. You don’t just breathe any old which way or accept the breath as it is. You ask yourself, “What way of breathing would feel good, would give rise to a sense of refreshment inside? What kind of breathing would give rise to a sense of ease and pleasure? What kind of breathing would help gladden the mind when it’s down, steady the mind when it’s erratic, release the mind from unskillful states?”

You don’t learn these things just by sitting there, watching. You experiment. This is how we learn about anything in the world. If we just sat there and watched and didn’t have any role in the world, we wouldn’t know anything about it. Things would come and go, and all we would know is that they were coming and going. We wouldn’t know why. We couldn’t steer them in a direction where we wanted them to go. It’s because we can interfere, we can play around with things, that we can learn about their connections.

That was Kurt Vonnegut’s image of scientists: that they were little kids playing around. And there is that aspect of science: We play around. We ask, “What about this? What about that? Maybe this is connected with that. How do you know? You test it.”

And it’s the same with the mind, the same with the breath. You have to test things so that you can use the breath and use your mind for what you want.

After all, we’re trying to create a path here. It goes some place.

I was reading today someone saying that as long as you have no goals and you’re not trying to get anywhere, then nothing can get in your way—which logically is true, but it certainly doesn’t help you when you’re sitting in the midst of an unpleasant emotion, something that’s disturbing.

We're trying to get out of these things. After all, the Buddha said that as we practice we're trying to escape from unskillful habits, unskillful mind states, the mind states that create suffering.

That's what the four noble truths are all about: to figure out which mind states are causing the suffering and how to put an end to them. And you can do that only by experimenting.

So when something comes up—you're sitting here with the breath and all of a sudden an unpleasant emotion comes up—the first thing you do is to figure out how to breathe so that the emotion doesn't get into your body.

This, too, is one of the steps of breath meditation. The Buddha calls it calming bodily fabrication, i.e., calming the way you breathe.

He also talks about calming mental fabrication, looking at the feelings you have—and "feelings" here doesn't mean emotions, it means feeling tones: pleasure, pain, neither pleasure nor pain—and looking at your perceptions, the images running around in your mind, giving rise to greed, anger and delusion, fear, panic, whatever. You want to calm both the feelings and the perceptions.

And a first step in that direction is simply to see what perception's operating there in the background. One of the ways you do that is by consciously trying to change the perception, bringing a new perception into the mind, one that's less likely to stir up those emotions. Then you can ask yourself: What in the mind resists this? What in the mind feels that this new image is artificial?

Often we have the feeling that whatever comes up in the mind is natural. Actually, what it is is the result of our old karma. It's an old habit. And the whole point of the practice is we're going to learn new habits. As the Buddha said, if we couldn't change our habits, change from unskillful to skillful habits, he wouldn't have bothered to teach.

And we can do that because of the process called fabrication. The Pali word is *sankhara*. It doesn't mean lies. It means the way you're shaping your experience.

Some of your present experience comes from the input of past karma, like raw materials, and then you shape it. If you didn't shape it, you wouldn't have an experience of the present moment at all.

Our experience of the present comes because we're shaping things with bodily fabrication, the way we breathe; with verbal fabrication, the way we talk to ourselves; and with mental fabrication, images and feelings.

These are things we can change.

It's because we have these forms of fabrication—taking the raw materials and turning them into our experience of the present moment—that we can make a change in the present. This way, when anything unpleasant comes up, we can ask ourselves, "What's the past potential that I'm feeding on right here, and how am I fixing it?"

It's like putting a dish of food on your table. You take one taste and it's miserable. You have to ask yourself, "What was the problem? Were the ingredients bad? Or was it the way I fixed them?"

Then you go back to the kitchen and fix something new. Try to choose better ingredients—as when you're trying to get the breath comfortable. Don't focus on the pains in the body. Focus on the parts of the body that seem okay. Those can provide raw material for a place for the mind to settle down.

There is that choice here in the present moment. If there were nothing but pain everywhere in the body, you'd die. There's got to be something pleasant, some part of the body, so focus on that.

And there's also a part of the mind that's more still than other parts of the mind, a part that's not playing along, say, with the panic or the lust or the anger. It's the part that's watching. Try to locate that. Settle in there.

That's like getting better ingredients for your food.

Then ask yourself, "How am I fixing this?" And here you just learn through trial and error. What kind of breathing feels good right now? Well, try longer breathing, shorter breathing. What kind of breathing will help maintain that sense of "okay" in the body, and allow it to deepen?—so that it becomes more and more pleasant, more and more like the sort of place you really would want to stay until you get a sensation that would feel good to bathe the body in and let it spread all around.

That's like learning new ways of fixing your food.

So when you've got better ingredients and better techniques, you employ them. You don't just sit there and watch whatever gets thrown up on your table. You go back to the kitchen and fix it well.

The only times when you sit and watch what's going on without doing anything are when you can't figure out what's going wrong. That's when you try to locate the part of the mind that's not reacting, the part that's more like earth. Tell yourself, "I'm going to stay here and just watch for a while" until you can detect what you've been doing wrong.

How will you detect it? There'll be little impulses in the mind to go in a certain direction or to think certain things. When you can catch them, you realize, "Oh, it's because I was thinking in this way or I was holding on to this image in the mind. That's why I was worked up." Then you take that knowledge and you put it to use.

It's in this way that the meditation becomes a skill. The Buddha's word for skill is *vijja*, which is the opposite of *avijja*. *Avijja* means ignorance, but also means a lack of skill. It's one of the causes for suffering.

So as we develop more and more skill in how we approach the present moment, we find that we're going to suffer less and less. This is a very direct lesson in the four noble truths. They're not abstract truths. They're truths to be used right now, to focus your attention. If you're suffer-

ing, well, what *is* the suffering? And what's the cause? What arises together with the suffering and falls away when the suffering falls away?

That's something you can watch right here, right now, and you can see it more and more clearly as you develop factors of the path.

So all this falls under the four noble truths that we were chanting about just now. They sound abstract, but they're not. They're right here. And the more skill you bring to them, the more you find that suffering really does fall away. The burdens on the mind fall away. And when the burdens on the mind fall away, it's good not only for you but also for the people around you.

It's in this way that the meditation is good for you and for others. It's a gift to yourself and a gift to others. Because when you're less burdened by your own suffering, you're in a better position:

- 1) not to be leaning on other people, and
- 2) to actually have the strength to help them shoulder some of their burdens as well.

So remember: You're starting out with a mind like earth, but you don't just stay there like a clod of dirt. You use that as a foundation for the path to something really good in life.