

Ardent about Your State of Mind

January 15, 2012

Close your eyes and watch your breath. Notice where you feel the breath when it comes in and where you feel it when it goes out. Try to stay right at that spot in the body. And stay right there even in between the breaths.

Don't let the mind go wandering off. If thoughts go wandering out, you don't have to follow them. You can come right back to the breath. You don't have to straighten them out before you're done with them. Just leave them unfinished.

Remember you've got unfinished business right here, which is developing your mindfulness, developing your alertness, so you really have to be ardent about it because this work is important.

Mindfulness is what keeps something in mind. You're keeping the breath in mind right now. As for alertness, that's what watches and sees exactly what's actually going on: what you're doing, what the results of what you're doing are. These are two qualities you need in all your activities in life.

You can think of the meditation as a form of exercise. You go down to the gym to get strong ideally so that you can use your strength around the house or in your work or whatever. In the same way, you exercise your mindfulness and alertness so you can use them throughout the day.

Then there's that third quality the Buddha talks about: being ardent about it, really taking this seriously and doing your best. You realize that training the mind is really important. This is where everything comes from. Your happiness comes from your own mind; your sadness comes from your own mind.

We tend to think about things outside as the cause for our happiness and sadness. But actually they come from the expectations that the mind sets up about the world. Either these expectations are fulfilled or exceeded or else they're not fulfilled. You've got to train your mind to figure out which expectations are realistic, which ones really do lead to happiness, because sometimes you set your hopes on things and you actually attain things that are bad for you.

So you've got to be mindful and alert about this. These aspirations you have: Where do they really lead you? Are they really worth following through with? What kind of aspirations would be good to work with, important to develop?

This is where the Buddha talks about the underlying quality that makes us ardent in the practice, and that's heedfulness, realizing that there are dangers in life and there are dangers not only outside but even more importantly there are dangers inside the mind: all your greed, aversion and delusion, particularly the

delusion that gets in the way.

So you've got to work on these things. You've got to develop the qualities that can see through your delusion. The problem with delusion, of course, is that it's hard to know when you're deluded.

But the Buddha says you can begin to notice that the mind has its forms of what he calls "intoxication." We're intoxicated with our youth: When we're young we think, "Okay we're strong, we can do anything we want, there are no consequences down the line."

Or we can be intoxicated with our health, saying, "I'm healthy and strong right now and it's going to just keep on going. I don't see any disease coming up in my body, so it must be okay."

Or we're intoxicated simply with the fact that we're alive. We don't think we're going to die anytime soon.

As a result, we forget about aging, illness and death. Then when these things come then you realize that you were heedless when you were young and you wasted your time. But you can't get your youth back at that point.

You've got to learn how to be heedful while you've got the chance to use whatever strength, whatever health, whatever life you've got.

This is what the Buddha said this is the source of all our skillfulness. He didn't say we're naturally good or naturally bad, simply that we can do both good and bad, and it makes a difference.

This is an important difference. Either you're going to suffer or you're going to find true happiness: Which do you want? Well, you want happiness. This is what you tell yourself, yet you go ahead and do all kinds of things that are against that. This is why you've got to work through these forms of intoxication.

This is one of the reasons why the fifth precept we chanted just now is against taking intoxicants. You might say with the other precepts other people are being harmed but when you take some intoxicant, it's just your own business. No one else is being harmed. But that's not the case. You're crippling your mind and you're adding more intoxication onto the intoxication that's already there. That makes you more heedless, and again that means you're going to do less to develop skillful qualities of the mind. When that happens, everybody suffers. You suffer and the people around you suffer.

So you want to be heedful about the fact that your mind needs to be trained and you've got only a little time right now. You can't get carried away with the fact that you're young and strong, healthy, and that you're still alive, that death doesn't seem anytime near. Death doesn't send any advance notices.

Aging: You can think that people would know when they turn sixty they're

getting old, but it just kind of creeps up on you. You think it's the same body you had before but it does things without your permission, without notifying you ahead of time.

So you've got to work on training the mind while you've got the chance because that's the most important thing in life. So be ardent about this practice. Be more mindful; be more alert. Really pay attention to the fact that your mind is the biggest problem in life but also when that problem is solved you've solved all the other problems.

So try to keep these points in mind and be heedful of your actions, be heedful of your state of mind, because that makes all the difference.