

How We Learn

September 21, 2014

Close your eyes and watch your breath.

When it comes in, notice where you feel it coming in: all the way through the in-breath. And when it goes out, where do you feel it go out?

Just watch that: again and again and again.

And ask yourself, "Is it comfortable?" If it's not, you can change. How do you change it? You can think, "What would longer feel like?" Then see how the body responds. "What would shorter feel like? Faster/slower? Heavier/lighter?"

See how the body responds to the idea that it can breathe in a more comfortable way.

Or just ask yourself each time you breathe in, "What would feel best now?" And see how the body responds.

You have to ask questions if you're going to learn anything here. There are instructions on what to do, but you have to ask questions for yourself as well.

The Buddha talks about how being easy to teach is one of the blessings of life, in that you learn a lot of good things that way. After all, one, if you're not easy to teach, no else is going to want to teach you. But what does it mean to be easy to teach? It doesn't mean you just do what you're told without thinking. You give things a try. If they don't work, then you try to figure out, "Well, why are they not working?" Only then, if you're not really sure of the result, you go and consult someone else again.

It's this back and forth of listening and thinking and working and watching: All of this working together is how you learn. Because what are you learning about here? You're learning about the mind, which is really important because the mind is what's shaping your life. If you don't understand it well, then you're not going to shape your life very well.

Urges will come up: You don't know where they came from, you don't know whether you can trust them or not. But if you get used to observing them using the breath as your foundation of where to watch, then when you just stay right here and see an intention come up in the mind, you'll be able to tell what kind of quality is behind it. Otherwise we just run with the intentions and then we find out later, "Oh, that was just a pack of dogs. It wasn't really a pack one to run with. It took a way-off path."

So you listen and then you try things out and then you think about them and then you go and consult again and then you go try them out again. Working this

way, you learn a lot about your mind.

You don't want have to re-invent the wheel every time you sit down and meditate. There are other people who've had experience before, and you can take advantage of their experience.

But at the same time, the words they use and the words you use in your mind may be something different. They may mean one thing by one word and you may mean something else. So you have to test things to make sure you really understand what's going on—that you not just understand the message but also turn around and use these tools to understand your mind. It's only when you can understand your mind that you can gain some control over it.

It's like understanding animals. If you don't understand the psychology of dogs, you can have a dog that's going to take over your house. But if you understand their psychology, you know when to be stern with them and when to be gentle with them. Then you have something useful around the house: someone who can defend you from invaders and who can give you company when you're alone.

It's the same with the mind. You've got to understand it. And the best way to understand it is to test it. Take some instructions from what other people have done to train their minds in the past and see how it works for you. If it worked for them, there must be some way it's going to work for you. So try to figure out, if it's not working out, what you're doing wrong. That way you become easy to teach and also you learn things easily as well.

Being an easy learner doesn't mean you just do what you're told. You do what you're told to give it a try, but then you ask, "How are the results?" If the results aren't what you want, then you adjust things, using your own powers of observation, using your own ingenuity. This is how we grow in the world. This is how we learn about things: by poking and testing.

So we use this technique of staying with the breath. As for any thought that comes up, you're not going to go with it. You're going to stay with the breath. And you have to learn how to avoid running with thoughts that sneak up behind you. You learn a lot of about the mind just mastering that one skill right there.

So when you're easy to teach, you learn a lot. Then that knowledge becomes yours.