

Sticking with Your Vows

December 30, 2017

Close your eyes and watch your breath. Watch it all the way in, all the way out. Make up your mind you're going to stay with it.

To stay with it, of course, you want it to be a good place to be. So ask yourself when you're breathing in, "Is this breath comfortable? Is it too long? Too short? Where do you know the point where it's long enough so that you can stop breathing in and then let the body breathe out on its own?" You don't have to push the breath out. Whatever effort there is in the breathing should be only on the in-breath.

Then see if you can stay here.

This is that time of year when people are reflecting on the past year and thinking about vows for the next year, to make the next year a better year. So you want to be able to show that you can stick with something, something simple like this to begin with, until you can start seeing the results. This is the difficult part of any kind of vow: Sometimes you have to stick with it for quite a while before the results appear. It's very easy to get discouraged. This is why it's good to have a sense of conviction that your actions do make a difference, and that by changing your actions it will change the course of your life.

That's the one thing the Buddha has you believe. There are lots of things you read in the Canon. I was asked a while back when I was in Thailand, "What about this story from the Commentary? What about that story? How do you explain that to little kids who are skeptical?" My response is, "The one thing the Buddha really has you believe in is the power of your actions." If you don't believe in that, then your actions become useless and you don't put any effort into them. That way, you miss an opportunity to really change your life. You can't wait for someone else to come along and change it for you. You've got to change it from within. You start with the mind and move out into your actions. But sometimes to train your actions, or to train your mind, you have to start with the actions.

Think about the precepts: Are there any precepts that you've been sloppy about over the past year? Maybe you should make up your mind to be really strict with yourself. The precepts about right speech: It's so easy to tell little white lies and think that it's okay. But what if you were really strict with yourself, that the only things that come out of your mouth are true, factual? This doesn't mean you have to tell everything to everybody, but the things that you do say are, as far as you know, true. Then the next question is: Are they necessary? Are they beneficial?

The necessary one was Ajaan Fuang's question. There is some idle chatter—we talked about this yesterday—there is some idle chatter that's actually useful for social grease purposes, to help people get along. But there comes a point where it becomes too much. And learning

how to figure out that “Now is enough of that, now we can stop:: That requires a lot of discernment. But it’s discernment well-used, because then it teaches you a sense of what’s enough inside in terms of your own thinking. After all, your thinking can run out of bounds, destroy your health and make you do things that you’re going to later regret.

So it’s good to think about how you’re going to stick with this vow that you’re going to make to be better about the precepts, be better about your meditation, whatever it is. Try to develop that quality of consistency.

It starts right here, with something simple like the breath. If you can’t stay with the breath for more than five breaths, then you’re in trouble. You’ve got to extend the time you stay here, extend it, extend it, and then you’ll start seeing the results.

As the Buddha said, there’s no real reason to doubt this, but there are people who doubt this anyhow. There are parts of the mind that may doubt it, too. So keep reminding them, okay, the most trustworthy people in the world—the people trained by the Buddha and of course the Buddha himself—all say that your actions do make a difference. So learn how to trust the Buddha and his disciples, rather than trusting the other voices in your mind, and see where that sense of trust can take you.