

The Thread of the Breath

January 2, 2018

Close your eyes and get in touch with your breath.

There are lots of things you could be focusing on right now, but this is one thing you want to choose in the midst of everything else. We like to think that we'll practice when everything gets really calm and really still. Everybody wants ideal conditions for practice. We're all part of the world, though, and thoughts of the world and different aspects of the world are right here. So you have to say, "I'm going to practice in the midst of all that." You can't wait for perfection before you're going to train the mind. In fact, that's the whole point: Everything comes from within. What you're dealing with is just sloshing around from your past actions coming back at you. You have to learn how to not pay attention to it.

Years back, I was teaching meditation at a college. The room they chose for us to sit in had a really loud clock. At the end of the first session, everybody opened their eyes and said, "That clock!" I said, "Wait a minute. The clock didn't destroy your breath. Your breath is still there." So, follow it through the same way you'd follow a thread going through a cloth. The thread may meander around a little bit, may wander here and there, and there may be other things criss-crossing it, but you try to stick with the thread. It's in sticking with the thread that you gain a sense of continuity inside, and it's the continuity that allows the mind to settle down.

So even though other things may be criss-crossing your mind right now, you don't have to pay them any attention. Stick with the thread, follow the thread of the breath all the way in, all the way out. Try to get more and more interested in the breath by seeing how comfortable you can make it. You can make it longer or shorter, fast or slower, heavier, lighter, deeper, more shallow. There are lots of things you can do with the breath.

So use that range of possibilities to make the breath more interesting, to give yourself some way to sense that this really is worth following through with. It's not just in, out, in, out, whatever. It's in comfortable, out comfortable.

Then you can figure out what to do with that sense of comfort. First you have to figure out how to maintain it, and then you figure out how do you spread it, so that you have a sense of ease throughout the body. In this way, you follow it not simply through willpower but also through interest. Try to follow it all the way through to see what it can do for you. And see how it can nudge some of those other threads out of the way, so that the thread of the breath becomes more and more prominent, until it feels like it's *the* natural place to stay. It's home base.