

The Skill of Not Suffering

April 7, 2018

Close your eyes and watch your breath. Take a couple of good long deep in-and-out breaths, and notice where you feel the breathing process in the body. You may feel the air coming in and out through the nose, but you can also feel the movement of the body as the ribcage expands and contracts, the abdomen expands and contracts.

And notice if it feels comfortable. If you feel any tightness or tension in any part of the breathing process, allow it to relax. You can change the rhythm of breathing too if you like: Make it shorter, more shallow; faster, slower; heavier, lighter. Try to see what the body needs right now.

Because as you meditate you're trying to get the mind to stay with the body in the present moment. And if the body's not comfortable, the mind is not going to want to stay. It's going to find reasons to go wandering off. So give it a good reason to stay: that it feels really good here. You see that you're working through tension in the body, improving the circulation of the body, so it's good for your health all-around.

When the mind is willing to stay with the present moment, then it has a chance to see itself. The message of the Buddha's teachings is that the suffering that really weighs the mind down is the suffering that we cause ourselves. People outside may be misbehaving, but it doesn't have to affect the mind. There's a skill you can develop so that you can live in a world that's imperfect but not suffer from the imperfections. As for the body, you can train the mind so that even though the body begins to age, grow ill—even when it dies—it doesn't have to suffer from the aging or the illness or the death. That's the skill we're working on here.

So we want to see the mind in action, and the best place to see that is right here, right now. You can't watch it in the past; you can't watch it in the future. You can learn from mistakes you made in the past and you can anticipate the results of your actions in the future, but the actual movements of the mind are right here. So you want to give it a good, still place to focus, so that when the mind does move, you know.

It's like lying on your back out in the middle of a big field. If you look up in the sky and there's nothing on the ground that you can compare things to, you look at the clouds you don't know what they're doing. Which clouds are staying still, which clouds are moving, you can't really tell, because there's nothing really firm to focus on that you know is standing still for sure. But if there's a telephone pole or a tree or a house, you can use that as your measurement to see which clouds are moving north, which clouds are moving south, which clouds are not moving at all.

And it's the same with the mind. You give it the breath so that when the mind begins to move, you know it's moved. And you can start noticing: Where is it moving toward? And why

is it moving? What does it want? Some of our wants are skillful, some of our wants are not skillful. You want to be able to see which is which.

That's why we give the mind a good, solid place to stay in the present moment. So learn how to cultivate this spot, learn how to turn the breath into your home, turn the mind in the present moment into your home. This is where the mind belongs. When you have a home, then you can open and close the doors as you see fit. Anyone that comes in that you don't like, you can close the doors. Or if there's anything inside the mind itself that's going to go out and cause trouble to the neighbors, you can close the doors too.

You get to know yourself a lot better. We spend so much time learning about the world and so little time learning about ourselves. Yet when we look in the present, we see that this is what we've got: a mind in a body here in the present moment. As life goes on, that's all you really have to hold on to. So learn how to make this a good place to stay so that you don't go out looking for trouble outside. You've got a good place to stay inside, you can protect yourself inside, you can nourish yourself inside.

This is why they call the practice a practice of refuge. You're creating a refuge for yourself right here, right now. In the chants that we'll have—talking about taking refuge in the Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Sangha—what that means is that you take refuge in their good qualities and you try to develop them within yourself. The Buddha was a person of wisdom and mindfulness, so you try to develop your own wisdom and mindfulness. He was a person of compassion, so you try to develop your own compassion. He was a person of purity in his actions, in other words, he wouldn't do anything intentionally to harm anybody at all, so you develop that quality in yourself, too. In that way, you develop your own internal refuge. *You* become your refuge. And that's the most secure refuge there can be.