

It Takes Focus to Change

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Close your eyes and watch your breath. Watch it all the way in, all the way out. Notice where you feel the breathing in the body and try to keep your attention right there. Notice also if it's comfortable. If it's not comfortable, you can change the rhythm: make it deeper, more shallow; heavier, lighter; faster, slower. Try to see what rhythm and texture of breathing feels good for the body right now. If the mind wanders off, just drop whatever it is you're thinking about and come back to the breath. You can think about the breath but try not to think about anything else.

You're trying to get the mind focused, because it's when the mind is focused that it has some power. It's like the light of the sun. You can put things out on the sidewalk and the sun doesn't burn them, but if you take a magnifying glass and focus the rays on one spot, you can set fire to things. It's the same with the mind. If you want to make some change in your life, you have to be focused.

This is what the Buddha's teachings are all about: to change our ways. He says that we're causing ourselves suffering and we can change our ways so that we don't have to cause that suffering anymore. But it takes some focus to change your ways. Otherwise you forget, or you remember but you don't really care. But if you realize that what you do makes the difference between whether you're going to suffer or not suffer, you should really focus on your actions: on what you do, what you say, what you think. Make sure that you're looking for happiness in the right way. The right way is the way in which your happiness and the way you find it don't have to harm anybody else.

You look at the way most people find happiness in the world: They try to find happiness in money, they find happiness in status, in getting praise, or in sensual pleasures. But those kinds of happiness create divisions. You gain, somebody else loses. Because where there's money, there's loss of money; where there's status, there's loss of status; where there's praise, there's criticism; where there's pleasure, there's pain. When you gain, somebody loses; when they gain, you lose. That kind of happiness creates divisions.

Whereas the happiness that comes from being generous, from observing the precepts, and from meditating doesn't have to take anything away from anyone at all. It's a happiness that spreads around: You benefit; the other people benefit. You're happy that you're doing these things; other people are happy that you're doing these things as well.

So try to focus your mind here on what you're doing and how you're looking for your happiness. When the mind is focused, then you can really change.

Try to maintain your focus on the breath in a way that's comfortable so that you like staying here, so that you can be focused all the time. Otherwise, if there are times when you're not focused on changing your ways, you just slip back to your old ways. And we're acting all the time, 24/7, so make sure that your mindfulness and concentration are as close to 24/7 as you can make them.

In that way, you benefit, the people around you benefit, and the way you look for happiness actually makes the world a better place.