

An Hour of Bliss

August 17, 2005

A whole hour. There's nothing pressing on you. No responsibilities. A whole hour where you're free to meditate. It can be an hour of torture or an hour of pure bliss, depending on what you do with it. So let's see what we can do to make it blissful.

Focus on your breath, then think thoughts of goodwill, as we chanted just now. Goodwill for yourself: You want to be happy. Goodwill for other people: Realize that other people want to be happy, too. You want true happiness, not just fleeting happiness. Something that lasts. Something that's really nourishing for the mind. The way to do that is to learn how to train the mind so that it doesn't become prey to greed, anger, or delusion, because those are the mental qualities that lead you to do things that harm yourself, harm people around you.

The first weapons you need in fighting them off are two very simple mental qualities: mindfulness and alertness, motivated by the desire not to cause suffering. The motivation is important, so it's good to think about it each time you meditate. You think about all the suffering in the world that comes from people acting on greed, people acting on aversion, people acting on delusion—and here you've got a mind that's perfectly capable of acting on greed, anger, and delusion, too. So you want to train it. And these are the tools for the training: mindfulness, alertness, ardency.

Mindfulness means keeping something in mind. Alertness means watching what you're doing and seeing how what you're doing connects with results. Ardency means keeping at this, time and again, time and again, learning how to keep at it in a way that feels natural—it's not too stressed—a way that actually gives you energy rather than taking it away.

So let's look at the breath. How do you know that you're breathing in and out? There are sensations in the body. Just keep the topic of breath in mind and watch for a while as you breathe in, as you breathe out: Where do you sense the breath? Here we're talking about the *process* of breathing, what the body does as the breath comes in, as the breath goes out. You realize you can sense that process almost anywhere in the body. It may be most obvious in the chest, or in the abdomen, or at the nose. Choose a spot where it feels natural to keep watching the breath, and then allow the sensation of breathing to be comfortable. Try not to tighten up around it.

That's one of the mistakes a lot of people make right in the very beginning. They're going to focus on the breath, so they try to strangle it to make it stay in place. And of course that makes it uncomfortable. When it's uncomfortable, you don't stay. You wander off.

So allow the breath be comfortable as it comes in, comfortable as it goes out. In fact, you can explore: What kind of breathing feels best for the body right now? Long breathing? Short breathing? In long, out short? In short, out long? Deep or shallow? Heavy or light? Fast or slow? There's a lot to explore. If you want, you can think of a meditation word along with the breath. One traditional word is *buddho*, which means "awake." It's the title that the Buddha gained from his awakening. You can think *bud-* with the in-breath, *dbo* with the out-: *Buddho*. But if you find that you can stay with the sensation of the breathing, drop the meditation word, because that allows you to be more sensitive to how the breathing feels.

Sensitivity is an important part of ardency. In other words, you pay very careful attention to how the breathing feels and then make adjustments. The act of making adjustment doesn't have to be too contrived. Just think: "More comfortable? Could it be more comfortable than this?" And see what the body does in response. If the mind wanders off, bring it back—and bring it back in such way that you're still on good terms with it. You have to be firm but gentle. Firm in the sense that you're not going to let it just wander away, thinking now that you've got a whole hour here, you can think about all kinds of stuff. If you do that, after about five or ten minutes you find that your legs hurt because you haven't been paying attention. Your legs can hurt; your back can hurt.

So if the mind wanders off and you catch it, just bring it right back. If you see it getting ready to wander off, bring it back. But bring it back in a way that you're comfortable with the breath. You're still on good terms with the breath. The breath here is a friend. As we chanted just now: Friends who are helpful are hard to find. You've got one right here.

In fact, the more attention you pay to the breath, the more you realize what it can do for you. For most people the breath just keeps them alive, that's all. But if you pay attention to how the breath feels in the body, you begin to realize that you can breathe in a way that feels good in the stomach, feels good in the chest. This is good for the different organs in your body. Breathe in a way that your shoulders don't tense up as you breathe in, and you're not holding on to tension in your shoulders as you breathe out. You can think of whatever tension or tightness or heaviness there is as dissolving away as you breathe out.

And you can think of the breathing as a whole-body process. When the texts talk about the breath, it means any sensation of energy, movement, or aliveness in the body. Parts of the breath energy in the body feel still; other parts move. But if you think of them as all being breath, then you don't create divisions in the body, as when you think of one part of the body being a solid part that pulls the breath in, pushes it out. Instead, think of the whole body as breathing energy: breath breathing breath. It's all connected. It's all coordinated. It's all on good terms.

When you get a sense of the breathing like this, see how long you can maintain it. Make it a game. As you maintain it, your mindfulness gets strengthened. Your alertness gets sharper. You become more and more sensitive to what you're doing, and how the results of what you're doing appear immediately in the breath. The more attention you pay to this, the more you see.

All of this develops good qualities in the mind, qualities you're going to need to deal with those issues of greed, anger, and delusion. When greed arises, or anger arises, when any of these things arise, they start in very small doses. If you're not sensitive, you don't see them. Oftentimes, you don't realize that they're there until they're already full-blown, roaring away: "I want this. I hate that." And you believe them. It's because you're not mindful, you're not alert, that you didn't catch them in time.

So you're here exercising your mindfulness, exercising your alertness, strengthening them with work that's very light. All this requires is that you just keep watching, watching, watching. If you find any sense of tension or tightness building up in the body, think of the breath energy flowing right through it, to help take apart that perception of a solid block. As you practice, you begin to see more and more that how you think about things, how you perceive them, how you label them, how you understand them, makes a huge difference in how you experience them.

As I said, this could be an hour of torture. We've had people come here and say, after an hour of meditation, that they've never been more miserable in their lives. Other people come and they find themselves able to become more and more at ease, more and more at home in the present moment. If you can't be at home in the present moment, where are you going to be at home? If you can't be on good terms with your breath, who are you going to be on good terms with?

So it's an essential skill. If you come at it with the right attitude, you find that the breath has a lot to offer. Mindfulness and alertness, as they get stronger, have all kinds of good things they can do for you. So take this hour to exercise them, to train them, so that the hour is not just a pleasant but also a useful hour. It gives skills you can take with you wherever you go.