

Chopping Off Thoughts

March 11, 2006

Focus on your breath. Know when it's coming in; know it's going out. Know when it comes in again; know when it goes out again: Just keep at that. That's the one thing you have to focus on for the hour. Tell your mind it has no business thinking about anything else.

In order to keep the mind with the breath, you have to make it interesting, so explore what kind of breathing feels good right now: long breathing or short, heavy or light, fast or slow. There are no set instructions on this part. This is what's up to you. This is what depends on your own powers of observation—which means that you have to explore. You can think of a shallow breath that goes only as far as the throat, or you can think of it going deeper down to fill the entire chest cavity, or think of the breathing filling the whole abdomen, or all the way down to your toes.

Think of it as a whole-body process. It feels good for the whole body as you breathe in, feels good for the whole body as you breathe out. If there are spots where doesn't feel good, think of relaxing them. Say there's tension or tightness in your back or in your pelvis, in your legs: Just consciously go through the whole body from the head down to the toes. If you sense any tension or tightness anywhere, think of it dissolving away and have it stay dissolved away as you breathe in, as you breathe out, as you breathe in again.

Try to find some part of the body that you can maintain in this state of relaxed comfort throughout the breathing cycle, because all too often you'll tense up a little bit for the in-breath or push things out with the out-breath, and that creates a lot of unnecessary tension around the breathing process. So think of it relaxing and staying relaxed all way through.

You have to be very watchful here. If your attention slips away, things will tense up again immediately if that's your normal way of doing things.

So you're reeducating the body in how to breathe, and at the same time reeducating your mind, getting the mind to stay in the present moment consistently without flitting off after other thoughts. No matter what other thoughts come in, you really have to be strict with yourself in not following them. Otherwise, you say to yourself, "I've got this whole hour here. I can think about my work, or I can think about my family, or I can think about my plans for my vacation or whatever," and then the whole hour gets eaten up by thoughts, with nothing particularly special to show for it.

The mind often thinks that it's clever. "I can think about this, I can think about that." It's funny how we have this respect for our trains of thought. Once a thought starts, we feel obligated to see it through to the end. It's like catching five minutes at the beginning of a TV show and feeling you've got to see it all way to the end, even though you know most TV shows are pretty stupid. The same with the thoughts of the mind: Many of them you've thought through before. They're like old movies you're showing again. You know how they end, and yet once a thought starts, you feel obligated to follow it through.

This is where you can change your mind. As soon as a thought comes up, you can chop it up into little pieces, so that the different strands of the thought don't connect. If anything is going to connect here, you want it to be your awareness of the breath. That has to connect through everything else. As for anything that pulls you away, try to chop it up. Try to be deliberately ignorant about whatever it is the mind wants to think about. Turn a deaf ear to its tunes, a blind eye to its movies. In other words, don't be willing to play along. The more quickly you can drop a thought, the better.

This quality is called arduency in the practice. What it means while you're with the breath is that you try to be as sensitive as possible to the breathing so that you can get a more and more refined sense of pleasure, a more expansive sense of fullness of the body. The more intent you are on observing the breath, then the better the results, the more refined results, the more gratifying the results. That's arduency while you're with the breath.

As for arduency when the mind is wandering away, that means that as soon as you note that you've wandered away, drop the thought, no matter what, no matter how interesting it may seem or how potentially interesting it may seem. Say, "This is not the time," chop it off, and go right back to the breath. Part of you may feel frustrated at this, so learn how to question that part. After all, you're here to meditate, not to knit together little thoughts about things. You want to make the breathing as continuous as possible and your awareness of the breathing as continuous as possible. Actually, with the breath itself, you don't have to make it continuous. It's always there. All you have to do is tend to it a little bit so that it's more comfortable, more continuously smooth, a better object to stay with. It feels just right for the body.

If you're feeling tired, try to breathe in a way that gives you more energy. If you're feeling tense, breathe in a way that's more relaxed. Work with the breath just enough so that it feels good to be with the breath coming in, feels good to be with the breath going out. You can focus on the sensation of breathing in any part of the body at all. There are no fixed rules in having to be at the tip of the nose or

the middle of the chest or whatever: anyplace where you know the breath is coming in, you know the breath is coming out, and it feels good. There's a sense of gratification. It satisfies a physical need to come in that deep, or to go out at that rate.

The real training, though, lies with the mind, getting it to stay continually with the breath and to have the proper attitude toward your distractions. You really have to be resolute and firm with them, that you're going to cut them off. The best way to do that is to cut through any connective tissue: the labels you put on things and the commentary that you spin about them. Learn how to cut it off in midsentence. Learn how to be ignorant of whatever these labels seem to mean. You find that there's a part of the mind that can just deny that it has anything to do with thoughts, that can claim that it doesn't understand the whole process of what a thought is, why anybody would want to get involved.

While you're meditating, that's the attitude you have to have toward your distracting thoughts. Think of them as something really strange, not the mind's normal fare. We're so used to them that we feel they're our friends, but you've got to learn how to look at them and say, wait a minute, at the moment, they're not your friends. They're not anybody you want to get involved with. They're crazy people trying to talk to you while you've got work to do. So even though you know the crazy people are there, you don't have to get involved in their tales. You don't even have to get involved with chasing them away. Just cut, cut, cut through any recognition that there's anything worthwhile there at all.

You find that that helps cut right through things to get the mind to settle down. Because all too often, the pattern is that if you know you have an hour to meditate, there's a long slow steady decline of thought as the mind begins to settle down, and finally it'll settle down toward the end of the hour. If you give yourself an hour and half to meditate, it'll take an hour and a half to settle down. Give yourself two hours, and it's a nice long, steady decline for two hours. In other words, the mind has this tendency to fill up whatever time is available to it with its thinking.

If you find that happening, remind yourself that you don't know how much longer you're going to sit. The timer is set for one hour, but you may not make it. The forecast tonight is for tornadoes in San Diego, and we might have a tornado here. Or you could have a stroke or a heart attack. Anything can happen. Once you've got a body, you're leaving yourself open to all kinds of uncertainties.

So don't take it for granted that you've got the whole hour. What you do know is that you've got this moment to bring the mind down—this moment. Don't tolerate any wandering around that the mind may want to do. We've been

wandering for who knows how long. When they talk about samsara, it's not just death and rebirth on the large scale. It literally means wandering. And the fact that that happens on the large scale means that it's coming out of the mind here with its small-scale wandering around. We want to sniff at the flowers here and look at the birds over there and gaze at the sky and see what's over the other side of the mountain. Then when we get to the other side of the mountain, there's another mountain, "Let's go and check that one out." And then there's the next and then the next. It's never-ending.

Keep reminding yourself that even though you may not know what's on the other side of the mountain, that's not the ignorance that really matters in your life. The real ignorance that matters is that you don't know your own intentions as they arise. Yet your intentions are the things that shape your life, so you can't be careless. You can't be heedless. You've got to stay right here, because there may be some really interesting intentions coming up that could lead you off in all kinds of weird directions, and you have to be able to cut them off right at the root so that they don't spread like a vine through all the rest of your thoughts and then strangle them.

This is what's meant by being heedful, realizing that if you allow the mind to keep wandering in certain patterns, it's going to create ruts, and then it's going to keep tending to follow those ruts again and again and again. It's like the ruts in snow. Your car gets stuck in the ruts in the road, and you find yourself crashing into a car parked on the side of the road or into a tree or whatever, because that's where the ruts lead you.

So as soon as you see the mind heading into its old ruts, steer away sharply get yourself out. And do your best to maintain your original intention, which is to stay with the breath. As the Buddha said, our potential for freedom lies right around the spot where intention arises in the mind. If you really want to gain freedom, you've got to know that spot very well. Fortunately, it's right next to where the breath is.

So if you want to see things clearly, watch the breath. Then, from that vantage point, all the other issues in the mind that have you mystified will become clear. Why is it that you say things and do things and think things that are harmful? Things that cause you suffering? Everybody wants happiness, and yet we do things that cause suffering: Why is that? This is where you've got to look. You're not going to learn it by going to the other side of the mountain.

So even though we have an hour to sit here, don't think of it as a whole hour. Think of it as right now right now, right now, right now. As soon as a thought begins to wander off, just chop it off right now. Get back to the breath. This way,

this big mystery in the mind of why we cause suffering for ourselves even though we don't want to suffer, is something we'll be able to unravel. We'll see it as it's happening. We'll see the ignorance from which it comes, and the cravings that lead us astray. We'll see them in action. We'll also be able see the cravings that lead us in the right direction. The Buddha didn't say that all cravings are bad, you know, just the cravings that lead to suffering. There is a desire that leads to true happiness, a desire that has to be augmented by learning how to be skillful, being mindful, alert, and ardent in your meditation. Cultivate that desire and see how far it can take you.