

Old Movies & New

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One of the best ways to get the mind to stay with the breath is to realize that there's a lot going on here when you breathe. It's not just in and out. The energy flow of the whole body is involved. For most of us, it's terra incognita, a place we don't know, unexplored jungle. But then as you begin to explore it bit by bit, you find a spot in the body that's sensitive to the breathing, that tells you when the breath is coming in, when the breath is going out. You begin to sense that there are ways of breathing that are comfortable, and ways of breathing that are not.

One way of alerting yourself to that is to try breathing in different ways. Try deep breathing for a while, then more shallow breathing, and see how your spot feels. See how it feels when the breath is fast, when it's slow, when it's heavy, when it's light. Experiment with it, and you see there's a lot to study, a lot to notice here. That way, your concentration becomes not just a matter of forcing the mind, but also of drawing the mind in, giving it something to explore, something to learn about, so that even if it doesn't settle down as solidly as you'd like it to, at least you learn something in the course of the hour. That will make you interested in coming back next time, to find more to learn, more to discover.

As the Buddha said, once you're aware of long breathing, and short breathing, then the next part of the path is to train yourself to be aware of the whole body as you breathe in, the whole body as you breathe out. And in the course of being aware of the whole body, there's a lot to see. Why does he have you do that? For one reason, when you're aware of the whole body, you're not just in one little spot, and when you're not just in one little spot, it's a lot easier to stay awake, to stay firmly established here in the present moment. If your awareness is small, it can slip off very easily. It's almost as if the way to past thinking or future thinking is a little tube. If the mind is small, it can fit down the tube. But if your awareness is broad, it won't fit.

You've got to inhabit the whole body from the head down to the feet, down to the hands. It's too big to fit in the past and future. What happens when you're thinking about the past or the future is that you turn part of your body awareness into a little world. There's a physical side to all your thoughts, and the more complex the thoughts of the past and future, the more territory they inhabit in your body. One of the easiest ways of making sure the body doesn't turn into a foundation for thoughts of past and future is to occupy it as fully as you can with awareness right here and now, so that when the breath calms down, thoughts of

past and future won't move into that place where it's calm. You've got to occupy it here with reference to the present moment. Otherwise, thoughts of past and future will occupy it.

Now, you find even as you get more and more interested in breath, there will still be a pull to thoughts of the past, thoughts of the future, because the mind is used to that kind of thinking, used to that kind of entertainment. It's like watching movies. Most of the movies we watch while we're meditating tend to be old movies, things that have been on the movie channel night after night after night for years. As soon as nothing seems to be happening in the meditation right now, you get bored. You began to think, "Well, I'd rather be entertained by x ," and there you go.

There are two ways of dealing with this. One is to examine the movies you tend to look at: What are they like? What kind of hero or heroine are you in those movies? Often the plot will concern things you're angry about, things you're worked up about, and you like to think about those things. This is one of the paradoxes of the mind. Stories where we suffer, stories where we were miserable, where other people took advantage of us, we like to think about those things. What's the hook?

Part of it, of course, is that we like being portrayed as a victim, because someplace in the story the victim has to come out on top. Or if the victim doesn't come out on top, that's because the world is stacked against the victim. So there's a justification for the victim's not doing well. Ask yourself, what's the lure of those kinds of stories? Why do you like watching those old movies? What do you get out of them? Look at this until you decide you really don't want to identify with the part of the mind that gets its kicks this way, finds its entertainment this way. That's one way of dealing with those old movies.

The other is to create new movies. The Buddha has a whole series of recollections, legitimate types of meditation that involve thinking. Don't think that all meditation is just a matter of staying in the present moment without thinking about anything else at all. Sometimes he has you think about the past, about times when you've been generous, about past times you've been virtuous, when you've held to your principles. This brings new narratives to the present moment. You need new narratives because the old unskillful narratives are hard to unravel. The more you think about them, the worse you feel about yourself, and they just tie you up in knots.

But if you can think in terms of the good things you've done in the past—times you've been virtuous, times you've been generous—and you follow through with those thoughts, they'll lead naturally to wanting to meditate. Well, here you

are, you're meditating. So the narrative brings you into the present moment again, in a way that's easy to put the narrative down.

So if you find the mind has a need to entertain itself with movies, give it some good movies, movies that will gladly bring it back into the present moment. Sometimes it's possible to drop the old movie and come to the present moment without much fuss, but if you find it difficult, come up with a new story line, one that builds on the fact that your real happiness in life comes from the times you were generous, the times you were forgiving, the times you could have done something against your principles and might have benefited from it, but you decided no, you wanted to stick with your principles. Those kinds of movies are really uplifting and when they lift you up, where do they lift you? They lift you here into the present moment, meditating.

Some other movies that are useful to think about are the skills you've developed in the past, issues that you had to work hard at to master, but you finally did. Those are useful because they give you lessons in how to approach meditation: how discipline can pay off, how things might not look like they're going to work out in the beginning but ultimately they do, lessons in how to apply desire to the path—because desire does play a role, after all. It's part of the right effort.

The issue is how to make sure that the desire is your friend in the path, and not your enemy, because there are so many ways that you're going to sit here wanting, wanting, wanting, and it doesn't bring anything about at all. In fact, it gets in the way. But there are other desires that actually help you: the desire to stay with the next breath, and the next breath, the next, the desire to do this skillfully. If you don't do it right, well, come back again and try it again. You've had experience with art. You should know that there were times when you spent a lot of times on something and you looked at it and realized that it was trash. So you threw it out and you started all over again, having learned from what turned out to be trash—which means that it wasn't a total waste of time. You learned from your mistakes, and you can do the same with your meditation. You make a mistake, well, what can you learn from it? The same process is involved here.

So those are other movies that you can play, the movies where you put in effort, put in time, where you had to use your powers of observation, use your ingenuity, and you came out with a skill. You can take those lessons and apply them here.

So if you find that the mind has a need for movies—and it tends to like not the great classics, but the old B and C movies: If you notice that happening, say, “No, I'd rather have an uplifting movie, a movie that brings me into the present

moment in the best shape possible to meditate.” That’s a legitimate part of the meditation: learning how to be a good movie director, a good scriptwriter. The best movies are the ones that take you out of the movie theater and back into the present moment, emotionally and intellectually ready to tackle the issues of the breath. It’s all part of the practice.