

A Special Time

August 6, 2007

When you sit down to meditate, keep reminding yourself that this is a special time for giving full attention to the training of the mind. Now, it is important that you regard the whole rest of the day as an opportunity to train the mind as well. In other words, try to keep the mind centered, keep watch over the mind in the midst of your other activities. This is an important part of training the mind, developing good qualities in the mind. But still, the time you sit down and close your eyes is really special, so give your full attention to what you're doing, full attention to the mind itself, full attention to the breath. Remind myself this is an important activity, training the mind.

The Buddha made the point that this is the main difference between a wise person and a fool: realizing that the mind needs to be trained, because the happiness you want in life comes from training the mind. If the mind isn't trained, then all the other good things you gain in life could actually lead to suffering. In other words, you gain something good but your thinking runs out of control. You decide that your happiness depends on this thing or that person or that relationship or whatever. Of course, you realize deep down inside that this thing or that person, that relationship, is impermanent, it's going to change. So immediately there's a sense of worry, a sense of possessiveness, the desire to fix the situation in such a way that your happiness won't be undercut. But as we've seen over and over both in our own lives and the lives of the people around us, the more people scramble around trying to create situations or circumstances to guarantee that they'll be happy, the more they undercut their own happiness, as long as that happiness is dependent on something outside.

But if the mind is trained, then no matter how bad things can get outside, it still has its own inner source of happiness. The training here means developing good qualities of mind, letting go unskillful qualities.

So we begin with something simple, like staying with the breath, as a way of developing two very important qualities: mindfulness and alertness, together with the ardency that develops the mindfulness and develops the alertness. In other words, you try to keep the breath in mind. That's the meaning of mindfulness: the ability to remember something, to keep it in mind so that you don't forget. In this case, it means reminding yourself to stay with the breath. No matter what other things will come up—thoughts, memories, anticipations—you have to keep reminding yourself: No, don't go there. Stay with the breath.

Then there's alertness, the ability to watch what you're doing, to see your intentions, to see how you act on your intentions, and then to see the results of those actions and intentions.

Ardency is what keeps you with these things. In other words, when you notice that you've forgotten about the breath, you come right back. When you notice that you're not paying attention, you focus your attention again. When you're focused, when you're paying attention, you try to be as sensitive as possible to how the breath feels.

This way, you develop two other qualities that are important for concentration. The first is directed thought. You keep thinking about what you're doing. You're actively engaged. The other is evaluation: You judge how things are going. This is how the mind settles in. Sometimes we think meditation means not thinking, but actually it means learning how to use your thinking in a skillful way, especially in the beginning stages, as you evaluate the breath, evaluate the way you're relating to the breath. You try to figure out which spot in the body is the best one to focus on, which rhythm of breathing is best for the body right now.

You can even be thinking about how you conceive the breath. There are lots of different ways of picturing the breath to yourself. One of the most effective for getting the mind into the present moment in your body right here, right now, is to think of the breath not just as the air coming in and out of the lungs, but as the whole energy flow in the body that runs along the parts of the body, that not only brings the air into the lungs and lets it go out, but also runs along the bloodstream, the energy that runs in your nerves, all the way out to every pore of your skin. That's breath as well.

So you're dealing with your whole experience the body as you breathe here.

Now, there are different nodes of this energy system in the body, such as the middle of the head, the palate, the base of the throat, the middle of the chest, or the spot just above the navel. These are spots from which the breath energy seems to radiate.

So you can choose any of those as beginning spots to focus on. Then see how it goes: if you've got the right spot, if you're applying just the right amount of pressure, not too much, not too little. If it's too much, things get stiff and constricted in the body. If it's too little, the mind is going to float away. What's the right amount of pressure? And what's the right way of conceiving what you're doing, conceiving the breath? As you evaluate these things to see what works and what doesn't work, this is how meditation becomes a skill.

In the Canon, the Buddha uses a lot of analogies to describe meditation with processes drawn from skills. For instance, it's like being a cook who learns how to

observe what his master likes to eat, what he doesn't like to eat, and adjust his foods accordingly. In the same way, you have to think about feeding the mind with breath energy. What kind of energy flow will feel most nourishing right now?

Sometimes the Buddha would compare a good meditator to an archer, able to shoot long distances, fire arrows in rapid succession, pierce great masses. In other words, be really penetrating in your perceptions, your understanding of what you're doing. And be very quick to notice when the mind has slipped off, and quick to bring it right back.

Often it's useful to think about skills you've developed, especially manual skills like cooking or carpentry or any kind of sport. Think about the attitude you brought to developing the skill, which attitudes worked and which ones didn't. For instance, there's got to be the desire to do this, but also you can't let the desire to get so overwhelming that it actually gets in the way of being able to observe what's working and what's not working.

So keep your desire well focused, be persistent, give this your full attention, and analyze what you're doing so that you can see what's working and what's not. Then use your ingenuity to figure out things that *will* work. When you find that what you do isn't working, well, what could you do to change it?

These are all qualities you want to develop in the meditation. And as you exercise them in the meditation, they become stronger, so that you can then use them in other areas of life as well.

So this is a special time to work directly on the mind, directly on the skillful qualities of the mind that'll help develop that sense of inner well-being, inner ease, inner pleasure, that can grow into a happiness that's really independent of things outside.

So remember to treat this as a special time. It's not a time to think about what you're going to do tomorrow or what you did today. You can think about those things at any time. Here's an ideal time to work directly on the mind. Let the mind put down all its other burdens so that you can focus directly on its own inner qualities. Treat this time with respect, because the qualities you develop here can play a huge role in providing you with a foundation for the happiness you want for the rest of your life.

Respect your desire for true happiness. Respect the practice as you're doing it, because without that respect, your opportunity for true happiness will slip away.