

Letting Go

April 2, 2009

Focus on the breath. Let the breath be comfortable. That's a skill right there: focusing on something and allowing it to be comfortable at the same time, finding the right way to focus, the right amount of pressure to focus. Choose a spot where the breath seems obvious—in other words, where you can clearly feel, “Now the breath is coming in; now the breath is going out.”

Allow the sensation of the breath to have some space, so that you're not squeezing it too much. The image in the Canon is of holding a baby chick in your hand. If you squeeze it too tightly, it's going to die. If you hold it too loosely, it's going to fly away. So find just the right amount of pressure.

As for any other thoughts that come into the mind that are not related to the breath, just let them go. Actually, the mind doesn't have a hand where it's holding on to these things. Letting go means that you don't continue playing along with them, you don't get engaged with them. A thought will appear, and that's a result of your past karma. Your present karma is to decide whether or not to get involved with it. For the time being, with anything else that comes up that's not related to the breath, you can just say, “Let go.” Don't get involved. Stop that particular activity.

You'll find that the mind is like a computer running lots of programs at the same time. If you close the window on one program, you find, “Ah, something else is right behind it.” Close that one, “Ah, something else is behind that.” If you ever wonder why things aren't clear in the mind, it's because too many programs are running all at once. There's a part of the mind that looks after the body, a part of the mind that looks after your social obligations, work obligations, family obligations; another part of the mind that's dealing with your own desire for pleasure and entertainment. Any of these can come in. As soon as the mind settles down with the breath, part of the mind will say, “Well, that's not important. I've got other more important stuff,” and it'll pull out whatever else. And it can be pretty random.

The fact that these thoughts appear in the mind is not the problem. The problem is figuring out how not to get involved with them. One way, of course, is to give the mind something else to work with. That's why we work with the breath. Try to explore the breathing sensations in the body. When you breathe in, where do you feel it? Is it in just one spot? Or do you feel it in lots of different spots in the body? Try to be aware of the whole body as you breathe in, aware of the whole body as you breathe out. Then try to get a sense of what kind of breathing feels good for the whole body, reminding yourself that it's good for your physical health and good for your mental health to do this. Sometimes that level of interest is in and of

itself enough to keep other thoughts at bay so that you don't pick them up, don't get involved—because you've got something more interesting to work on.

If you find that these interfering thoughts are coming back again and again and again, then you've got to deal with them directly. One way is to think about the drawbacks of getting involved in them. Where do they lead you? Usually they lead you nowhere. You go around and around and around in circles on some things. Or you can ask yourself, "If this were a movie, would I pay to see it?" A lot of these obsessive thoughts are not all that interesting, and yet for some reason they hold some power over the mind. They keep coming back, coming back. So look at them straight on and ask yourself, "Are these really worth getting involved in? Don't I have better things to do?" And don't feel obliged to tie up the thoughts or see where they lead. Sometimes there's a sense of obligation, that once a thought comes into the mind you've got to finish it before you can let it go. No, just drop it mid-sentence. Even if it's a thought about a real responsibility you have, this is not the time and place to be thinking it.

That series of questions that the Buddha has you ask about speech applies to your thinking as well: Is it true? Is it beneficial? Is this the right time and place? Sometimes the thoughts have no truth to them at all. Or they may be true but they're not all that beneficial. Or even if they're true and beneficial—in other words, things that really deserve to be thought about—this is not the time and place. Sometimes that series of questions is enough to let them go—in other words, to stop getting involved in them.

Or if they keep coming back, you can just make up your mind you're not going to pay them any attention. Even though the thoughts come in, the breath is still there. Think of them being back in some corner of the mind, churning away on their own, but you don't have to get involved. The image in the Canon is of seeing something you don't like so you just turn your eyes and look someplace else. Or you might think of it as a stray dog coming to bother you. You know that if you feed the stray dog, it's not going to leave you alone. So you have to act as if it's not there. You know it's there but you act as if it's not there. You've got other things to do. After a while the dog will get the message and it'll go away.

Or you can notice that when a thought comes in, there's stress in the body someplace. There's a holding in the breath, there's a catch in the breath, a spot where the breath energy isn't flowing. Try to find where that is in the body. When the thought comes in, exactly which part of the body has that sense of tension? When you find it, relax it. Relax around, as they say, the fabrication of the thought, and it won't have anything to hold on to in the present moment. It'll stop.

If none of these approaches works, just make up your mind to grit your teeth, press your tongue against the roof of your mouth, and say, "No, I'm not going to think that thought." Just stay with that sensation of holding the tongue there. As they say, beat the mind down with your intent.

These are five different ways of letting go of thoughts, in other words, learning how not to get involved. And these are important skills. At the very least, they help you stay focused on the breath so that you can get somewhere in the meditation. You can start seeing a sense of ease, a sense of continuity as you stick with the breath, and the ease that comes with that, the ease that comes from not being pestered by these other thoughts. The mind has some breathing space.

You also find that you can apply these same skills to other areas of your life as well. If you've got a job that requires focused, continued awareness, they help you stay focused. If you've got big issues in life, heavy responsibilities, then having these skills allows you to put those responsibilities down, so that you're not carrying them around all the time.

I was talking today with someone whose job is as a financial advisor. This is a bad time to be a financial advisor. He's got lots of clients with lots of problems. And he found himself just a couple of days back with a really bad heart condition. He had to be checked into the emergency room, spent the night there, all because he couldn't put his responsibilities down. Of course, you want him to be responsible, but you don't want him to kill himself with those responsibilities. So when you have responsibilities like that, you have to learn how to put them down when you're not gaining anything by thinking about them, when it's not the time. In other words, they may be true, they may be beneficial, but it's not the time and place for them. You've got to be able to put those thoughts down. Otherwise, they can kill you.

Of course, when you *do* die—the body's going to have to run out at some point—you really want to be able to keep your mind under control. And it's going to be hard, because so much of our sense of control comes from our physical level of energy, and of course when you're dying your physical energy is at its lowest ebb. The brain starts getting foggy. But you want to have these skills well-practiced so that the mind doesn't latch on to strange things. And above all, don't be thinking about the things you might be worried about: the people you're leaving behind, jobs you're leaving behind.

There's a fine passage in the Canon where a man is really, really sick, and his wife is afraid he's going to die. So she goes and says to him, "Look, don't worry about me; don't worry about the children. I've got enough skills that I can take care of myself and of them. I'll keep practicing the Dhamma." And her refrain, over and over again, is that it's bad to be worried at the point of death. Because after all, the mind will start latching on to its worries and then gets reborn in one of those halfway houses, those states where you're obsessed about something and can't let it go. In other words, you get fixated on it. You keep thinking about it. You've got to realize at that point you've got to let go of *all* those responsibilities. You can't hang on anymore. After all, if you hang on, you become a ghost and then haunt the people you're concerned about. That, of course, freaks them out. You're not doing anybody any good.

You've got to realize that a lot of these thoughts, even though they may be responsible and they may be compelling, have their time and place. When it's no longer the time and place,

you've got to learn to let go. This is why we meditate and practice letting go on a daily basis, i.e., to stop thinking about those things. You have to *die* to the world.

There's that story I've told before about a woman who came to see Ajaan Fuang. She was going to spend two weeks at the monastery, but the second day she was there she went to him and said, "I've got to go home." "Why?" he asked. "Well, I'm concerned about my husband and my children. I don't know what they're going to do, who's going to fix food for them, how they're going to manage." He said, "Look, tell yourself that you've died. They'll manage."

So when you meditate, you're practicing how to die. You've died to the world as you sit here. All your other responsibilities, you just put them aside. Because after all, who knows, that earthquake they warn about may come before you get home. Before the end of the meditation session, the building could fall down on us, collapse, kill us all. Your body may not be able to last for the next hour. You never know. Death doesn't come with a sign beforehand that warns you, "x number of days", "x number of hours." So you've always got to be ready to let go, even without a moment's notice.

So this is an important skill, learning how to stop thinking about things. If you're going to think about something, think about something skillful: this state of mind focused in the present moment, just being aware in the present moment of what's happening in the body, what's happening in the mind. Just make sure that the mind doesn't go down any unskillful thought pathways. At the very least, make sure it stays with its sense of being centered, alert in the present moment. It doesn't have to be responsible for anything else right now. Learn to develop that as your default mode. That right there is a really important skill.