

A Home for the Mind

December 26, 2009

Notice your breath. How does it feel? Where do you feel it? Take a couple of good, long, deep in-and-out breaths, and see how that feels. If it feels comfortable, keep it up. If not, you can change. But notice where you feel the sensation of breathing, and notice the point where the breath gets too long: either too long coming in or too long going out. Then adjust your breathing so that it's just right. You're not squeezing it; you're not putting any pressure on it. You're just allowing it to come in and go out in a way that feels comfortable, at ease and refreshing.

You want to give the mind a good place to settle down so that it can get out of the worlds of its thoughts and take stock about what's really important in life. But to gain a sense of what's really important, you need a place to stand where you can gain some perspective so you're not caught up in the pressing but not very important issues of work and family. You want the mind to have some time to be on its own. In fact, you don't even have to listen to the Dhamma talk here. Let it stay in the background.

The most important thing is your direct confrontation with the breath: where you're feeling it, how you relate to it, staying with that physical sensation of breathing in and breathing out so that you can notice if the mind is about to take off. You don't have to go with it. It's because it hoodwinks you that you suddenly find yourself flying off into another world. But if you're really alert, you can gain a sense of the signs that tell you: Okay, now the mind is about to go, so double your efforts to stay with the breath.

And remind yourself that the breath can be really comfortable. Rapture is one of the qualities that can come from staying steadily with the breath with sensitivity, with alertness. So if the breath doesn't feel really comfortable, you can ask yourself: In what way it could feel more comfortable?—either in the mechanics of breathing or in the way you conceive of the breath.

Ajaan Lee talks of the breath energy flowing through all parts of the body. Allow yourself to think in those terms, so that the breath is a full-body experience. From the skin all the way into the bones, it's breath. You're sitting here in the middle of it, allowing it to come in and go out like the waves at the edge of the ocean. There'll be some variety. You notice with ocean waves that they don't all come regularly; there's an irregular rhythm to them. And the body will have its rhythms as the mind settles down. A way of breathing that felt good five minutes

ago may not feel so good right now, so try to keep on top of it. Gain a sense of the rhythms of the body settling in and of the mind settling in.

How to stay: That's the important part. Focusing on the breath is not hard. It's *staying* focused that's the hard part. Maintaining a sense of balance is like getting on a bicycle. It's not hard to get on the bicycle, but staying balanced takes a while if this is the first time you've ridden a bike. But with time, you gain a sense of how to adjust. If the bike is tipping over to the right, how do you lean to the left? If it's leaning to the left, how do you lean to the right? How do you compensate?

That's the same sort of set of skills involved in the meditation. When you're feeling antsy, how do you calm things down? When things are getting a little bit too calm, to the point where you're beginning to drift off, how do you sharpen your alertness? These are things you want to look into. After a while, you find you gain a sense of how to do it. All this is done so that the mind can gain a place where it feels at home, where it feels solid, and it can look at things from a very steady point of view with a steady gaze.

Meditation is not just a matter of sitting here calmly or being relaxed. It's a matter of using that calm, using that relaxation, so that you can look at the issues in your life. This is why we have the chanting at the beginning of the meditation. Partly just the rhythm of the chanting helps to calm you down, but it also gives you things to think about.

We have the chants of the Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Sangha to remind you of the values behind this practice—that the happiness you find in life depends on your actions. Where do your actions come from? They come from the mind. And if the mind isn't well trained, it can destroy its own happiness very easily. That's why we're here training the mind. These are the values of the Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Sangha. This is what the Buddha discovered in his awakening; this was the Dhamma he taught. This was the training that the members of the noble Sangha went through: focusing on their actions, trying to see where they were skillful, where they were not, learning from their mistakes, and holding on to that desire to become more and more skillful in every aspect of their behavior. You can maintain that as a steady goal only if the mind is well trained, if you're mindful, alert, concentrated, discerning. These are the qualities that we develop as we meditate.

Then there's that reflection on the requisites: the food, clothing, shelter, medicine that we use. Why do we use these things? Because we have to look after the body. It's a given in life. It's so much of a given that we tend to overlook it. Just the fact that we have this body requires a lot of care and a lot of attention. And the things we need to survive place a burden on other people. So how do we

live in a way that's light—as unburdensome as possible? Well, again, the more you can find well-being in the mind, the less of a burden you are on others. Your karmic footprint gets smaller.

That relates to the next reflection: the facts of aging, illness, and death. The purpose of that is not to get you depressed. It's simply to remind you: Where are you looking for your happiness? Are you looking for your happiness in things that are going to leave you? Or are you going to look for your happiness in things that can stay? The things that stay are the qualities you develop in the mind. So when that reflection ends with a comment on action and karma, “All beings are the owners of their actions,” it reminds you that what you *do* is what shapes your life. So you want to learn how to focus your actions in a skillful direction.

And finally, there are what are called the sublime abidings, reminding us that, in our search for happiness, we want to make sure to keep the happiness of other beings in mind as well. We want a happiness that's harmless. Then, feeling compassion and empathetic joy for other beings—compassion for their sorrows, empathetic joy for their happiness—develops skillful qualities in the mind. Again, it reminds us where true happiness lies; it has to lie in something that's totally harmless. The reflection on equanimity reminds us that there are a lot of things in life we can't change. If you spend your time worrying about things you can't change, getting worked up over things you can't change, you're wasting the energy you could use to focus on the things you *can* change.

All these chants remind us of the values that lie behind the practice and they give us reflections to consider. Once the mind begins to settle down, the big question is how you're going to use this concentrated mind. What are you going to apply it to? We look around us and see people focusing on all kinds of different goals. For some reason, it's easy to look at other people's lives and see, “Okay, that's skillful; that's not” or “That's foolish; that's wise,” in the goals that they set for themselves. But for some reason, when we set our own goals, it seems a lot harder to gain a sense of what we should follow and what we should let go. This is why it's important that you get the mind to settle down and gain a sense of distance, a sense of perspective on your normal concerns. The mind needs its own place like this so that it's not swept up with other people's ideas—or swept up with ideas that you haven't really thought through and considered.

This is a really important part of the meditation, taking time to look at your values and to ask yourself about these ideas that have been controlling your life. Do you really believe in them? Do they really make sense? This is an important aspect in getting the mind to settle down. You can see these things more clearly. You look at your life and you can ask, “What do I want to accomplish in this

lifetime? What would be something good to leave behind? What would be something good to take with me?” What *can* you take with you? The qualities you develop in the mind. As for the good you leave behind, that’s your generosity to the world. That, too, is a good quality to develop, because it actually goes with you as well.

So when you’re meditating, it’s not just a technique for relaxation or stress reduction, although you do relax, and the level of stress does go down. But it’s also an opportunity to look at your life. You gain a sense of what you really want to do with it—what’s really worthwhile, what’s really valuable—so that your efforts to find happiness really do yield a happiness you can depend on, a happiness that stays, that doesn’t disappoint, a happiness that harms no one.

So take this opportunity to let the mind find its own spot, its own place, its own sense of home here in the present moment, because this sense of being at home here, of being settled in, is absolutely essential for any kind of true happiness.