

Where to Look in the Present

June 15, 2011

Take a couple good, long, deep in-and-out breaths, and establish your attention right there: right at the sensation of the breathing. Notice where you feel the breath. Notice the quality of that feeling. You can feel it anywhere in the body, in the same way that they can measure your brainwaves in any part of the body. The breath has an effect on the whole nervous system. So, try to see what way of breathing feels best for your nervous system. Settle down right here and maintain the intention to *stay* here.

That's going to take some work because other intentions will start coming up. A thought will come into the mind, and you go off into it, someplace else. You have to say, "No, come right back here." Sometimes the intention to move will be conscious, but most often it'll be unconscious. You suddenly find yourself someplace else, and you don't know how you got there. But for the time being, you don't have to wonder about how you got there. Just bring yourself back.

And reward yourself for coming back. Give yourself a really gratifying breath, something that feels good down into the torso, down into the heart, down into any part of the body that's especially sensitive to the movement of the breathing. Just keep your eye out for the fact that the mind will probably slip off again. Try to catch the warning signs so that you can tell when it's beginning to lean in the direction of going someplace else. Then, get it back on to the breath.

When you can sense those signs and not just give in to them, that's when you're making progress in the meditation. Sometimes we're told that you shouldn't think of successful or unsuccessful meditation, or good or bad meditation. But meditation is a skill. The whole concept of skill is basic to the Buddha's teachings. We're working on a skill here, which means you have to be observant and learn from things. Keep in mind what you want to accomplish here. You do want to get the mind to settle down. You do want it to be clear. You do want to have a sense of ease and well-being. The Buddha describes right concentration as including rapture as well. So those are the things you're aiming at.

The question is learning how to aim skillfully. In other words, you're learning how to keep your desired goal in mind and then actually work on the causes that'll get you to that goal. That's where your main intention has to be. Fortunately, it's right here at the breath.

You're working on your intention. This is the big factor that shapes your life.

This is why, when you're focusing on the present moment, it's not just a general floating around awareness of the present. You want to focus on what your intentions are. The best way to do that is to set up a single intention and try to maintain it. That way, you have some way of measuring other intentions that move in and try to push you in this direction or that. If you don't have a firm intention, you give in to their pushing and you wander around. You really don't know what's happening because there's no clear point of reference. But, here, the intention is to stay with the breath. That's your point of reference.

To help that intention along, you try to make the breath as comfortable as possible. Try to explore the way the breath energy feels in the body and the effect it has on the different parts of the body. If any parts in the body feel especially starved of breath energy, try to give them a larger share. If any parts of the body seem to be doing all the work in the breathing, give them a vacation. Keep them totally relaxed as you breathe in and totally relaxed as you breathe out. See which other parts of the body will start picking up the slack.

For a lot of us, the shoulders tend to be overworked. Different parts of the face tend to get overworked. So, think of them relaxing and *staying* relaxed with a sense of fullness and ease as you breathe in, as you breathe out. See how the breath has an effect on your posture and how your posture has an effect on your breathing. There's lots to explore here. If you learn how to take an interest in the issues of the breath energy in the body, that makes it a lot easier to maintain that original intention to stay here and be on the lookout for any intentions wanting to go someplace else.

This is how the teaching on karma relates to the practice of meditation, because karma is all about intention: the way intention shapes your present moment and the way it shapes things on into the future. When you're meditating, you're primarily focused on the issue of how intention shapes the present moment and how your experience of the body changes simply through the intention to stay with the breath in a skillful way.

Now, you'll also run into the effects of past intentions: in other words, thoughts, certain pains you have in the body, or certain habits that keep going through a loop over and over again as they just pop into your mind. But your main interest here is the difference you can make by changing your intention right now—establishing a good intention and then maintaining that good intention. There's a lot to be learned by focusing on the intention. You get to see the movements of the mind. And you begin to realize that the more you exercise the choice to do the skillful thing, the more freedom you have, and the more clarity there is in the mind. It's right around the element of intention and attention that

you're going to see all the important things you need to see in the mind for the sake of gaining freedom.

So this is why we're focused here, and this is where we're focused: in the present moment. It's not because the present moment is a wonderful moment. A lot of times you can think of lots of present moments that weren't pleasant or wonderful. The reason we focus on the present moment because it's the important moment. It's right here that you can make a difference in your life. It's right here that you can gain an understanding as to why there's suffering, why there's stress, and what can be done about it.

So, always be very clear that when you're in the present moment, it's not just for the sake of nurturing an openness to whatever comes up. You need to have an underlying intention for what you're doing here. You want to learn how to examine that intention more and more carefully.

In the beginning, it's wise not to focus too directly on the intention. Just focus on the breath, because the breath is easier to focus on and it gives you a lot to work with. But as you get more and more sensitive to the breath, the breath gets more refined, and the movements of the mind will come more and more to the fore. Then, the quality of the intention and all its influences—the perceptions you have, the feelings you have, the things you pay attention to—will become clearer and clearer.

So, if anything else comes up in the present moment—any outside sound, outside distraction, inside distraction, whatever—for the time being just let it pass, let it pass. You just want to stay right here with the breath, with the sensation of the breath coming in, the breath going out. The sensation of the breath energy in different parts of the body is there all the time, regardless of whether the breath comes in or goes out. There are lots of different kinds of breath energy in the body to explore. Just maintain your intention to stay tuned in to the breath, and don't tune in to other things, because this is the station that has all the interesting news right now.