

## *A Load Off the Mind*

*August 25, 2012*

We come to this quiet corner here at the end of the road, with the chaparral all around us, to find a quiet corner in our own minds, because that's something you can take with you wherever you go. Whether you're in this spot at the end of the road or at an intersection some place, it's good to have that quiet spot in the mind.

But it's best to try to find it first with good outside surroundings, surroundings that are conducive. Try to find a place where you don't have a lot of responsibilities, or even if you do have some responsibilities, they wear lightly. You don't want them to weigh you down all the time.

While you're sitting here meditating, think of all those responsibilities being pulverized. They don't have any meaning right now. Your main responsibility is the breath. The state of your mind staying with the breath: That's all you've got to worry about.

As you're focused on the breath, you want to focus on it in a way that makes it easy to stay here. That's why you have to choose a spot in the body that's congenial. Choose a way of breathing that's congenial as well. Experiment to see what feels best right now. What does your body need? Does it need long breathing or short breathing? Does it need to be energized? If that's the case, breathe in a way that gives it more energy. Does it need to be relaxed? Breathe in a way that's more relaxing. Try to have a sense of what would be nice and balanced right now.

Also, learn to think of the breath in a way that makes it easy to breathe in and easy to breathe out. Sometimes you find, as you breathe in, that there's a tension that'll build up, say, in the head or someplace in the shoulders or the back. That shows you're using those muscles too much in the breathing. The breath can come in and out without tension building up at all. The tension is something unnecessary—something you've added on. Very consciously allow those parts of the body to stay relaxed and see if you can still breathe in. It may feel strange for a bit, but after a while you find that it really is more refreshing. It really is more energizing. It really is better for you.

This is one of *the* most important things you learn as you meditate: that you're adding a lot of unnecessary stress, a lot of unnecessary suffering to life, simply in the way you breathe—and also in the way you think, the way you perceive things, even the feelings you focus on. Right now, you could be focusing on the parts of the body that are a little bit painful or a little bit uncomfortable, and you could

very easily get yourself really, really deeply in pain by the end of the hour. Or you could focus on the potentials for something that's comfortable—a sense of ease.

There are parts of the body that may seem neutral at the moment. But if you think of the breath energizing those parts, giving them a sense of fullness, and allowing that fullness to spread so the different full spots connect, you find that the potentials of the body are different from what you thought. A lot of this has to do with what you're doing right now, what you're choosing right now, where you're choosing to focus, how you're choosing to focus, and how you picture these things to yourself in your mind.

In other words, suffering is optional, and it's usually through our own ignorance that we take the suffering option. But as you meditate, you learn that there are other options as well. There is, as the Buddha said, the potential for rapture here in the body. There's the potential for stillness, the potential for pleasure. These potentials are all here. You want to learn how to develop them. Ferret them out, find where they are, and see what you can do to protect them so that the sense of well-being can grow.

This is why it's so important that you learn how to question as you meditate, not in the sense of doubting, but with a curious sense of, "What am I doing? Is it getting good results? Could I be doing something better?" That kind of questioning is very helpful.

Look at the life of the Buddha as he was pursuing awakening. It wasn't that he had it all mapped out ahead of him. He was feeling his way. He had to notice that he was causing himself unnecessary suffering one way or another. He'd stop and ask himself, "Why am I doing that? Why am I looking for happiness in the wrong places? Why am I adding this unnecessary suffering on myself? Why am I following a path that's not getting the results I want? Could there be another way?" Then he'd use his imagination to try to figure out what some other ways might be. Then he would test them.

So even though we have the path laid out to some extent—we know that virtue, concentration, and discernment are important and we know the breath is a good place to stay—still, there's a lot that we've got to learn about how we breathe and how we approach the meditation. Sometimes you find that as soon as you sit down to meditate and even just think about focusing on the breath, a tightness develops in the body. Okay, what did you do? Why do you have that habitual reaction? What is there about trying to be consciously aware of the breath that makes you tense up around it?

If you find that happening, stop and think about goodwill for a bit, or any other meditation topic so that you can divert your attention away from the breath

for a while. Then come back to the breath and notice: How is the breath while you're focusing on goodwill? How is the breath when you're focusing on compassion or on recollection of the Buddha? As soon as you tell yourself to stay with the breath, what happens? What did you change? That's one way of catching yourself adding unnecessary stress and suffering.

It should be a perfectly normal, natural process right here. The question is, when things just feel just natural and normal, how can you push them a little bit so that they get better? The pleasure that comes from concentration isn't something that's just going to happen to you and stay. Of course, there are times when you run across it inadvertently, and those times give you a little taste: Oh, this is how good it can be. But if you aren't clear about what you're doing, clear about how you can maintain it, it's going to leave you.

But if you try to be very, very sensitive to how the breath feels, very sensitive to how you're focusing on it, and how the way you focus has an impact on the breath, then if you figure out it's having a negative impact, what can you do to counteract that? As you figure these things out through your own experimentation, you find that this potential for rapture really can develop. The potential for ease and well-being, the potential for stillness of mind can develop in a much more solid and intense way than they would if things were left to go their own course.

So try to be very, very sensitive to what you're doing right now as you focus on the breath. If you see any unnecessary stress, any unnecessary tension or tightness, learn how to let it go. See if you can continue breathing in, breathing out as you let it go. In this way, you detect lots of unnecessary suffering, unnecessary stress you've been carrying around that you didn't even realize you were carrying.

It's like having a weight on your shoulders for as long as you can remember, and all of a sudden, the weight is lifted from your shoulders. You find that you can stand taller than you could before. Your posture feels more comfortable. It's not that someone told you to carry that weight around. You were just doing it out of habit. So learn how to question your habits, and you'll find that the load of life that you're carrying around doesn't have to be as heavy as it has been.

This is the skill you want to be able to take back with you when you leave this quiet corner. It allows you to have that quiet corner in the mind where you can observe these things. And you can use that quietness to get more and more sensitive, more and more skilled at learning how to take the loads off the mind.