

Everything's Right There

August 6, 2013

We focus on the breath because when the mind is focused on the breath, everything you need to know to put an end to suffering is right here. You're at the right spot. It's simply a matter of getting used to it, realizing the potentials all around you right here, both in the body and in the mind.

In the body, you've got the breath coming in, going out. There are feelings, too. Are they comfortable? If not, you can make changes. See if the way you breathe is going to have an effect on those feelings. Try longer breathing, shorter breathing; deeper, more shallow; heavier, lighter. Learn to read the feelings that come about as a result of paying attention to the breath.

When the Buddha talks about being mindful, it's not simply being aware and non-reactive to what's coming up. You're trying to keep things in mind. Alertness is what notices what's happening. Mindfulness is what remembers things that are useful to know right here. You remember to stay with the breath and then you also remember when you've meditated in the past: What has helped? Where is your sweet spot, the spot where it feels really good to settle down?—where you breathe in and the breath feels especially refreshing. Or if you've noticed that the body seems out of balance, you can remember the last time it was out of balance like this. What did you do that got good results? What are the things you did that didn't get good results? You can put those aside for the time being. Focus on the things you remember that worked.

The Buddha says that when you're practicing like this, three qualities hover around each factor of the path. There's right view, which is like having a map. Right mindfulness is like being able to remember the map. And then there's right effort. All these things are devoted to recognizing what's right view, wrong view; right resolve, wrong resolve; all the way down through the factors of the path. Then you remember what's relevant to giving rise to right view and all the right factors of the path, and what's relevant to getting rid of all the unskillful factors. That's what mindfulness does. Right effort is what does the work. So they have to work together. It's not the case that right effort is one kind of practice and right mindfulness is something else. They have to go together.

As do the four frames of reference. When you're working with the body, you have to look for the feelings that are associated with the breath. As for the mind, when it's right here with the breath, you can ask yourself, "Is the mind in balance? What shape is your mind in right now? What's the state of your mind?" Is it feeling sluggish? What can you do to give it a little bit more energy? If it's feeling frazzled, over energetic, what can you do to calm it down? If it's carrying some burdens around, what you do to release them? When the mind is focused on

the breath, you can see these things clearly because you have a point of reference. As for anything that would come up in the mind that would pull you away, you want to develop the qualities that enable you to work yourself free from those things.

As the Buddha said, you're putting aside greed and distress with reference to the world. Anything that has any reference to the world, that would remind you that you're on the human plane right now, just remember that it's inconstant, it's going to change. For the time being, you're looking for something that's more valuable than that.

So these are the things you need to know. The good qualities you're developing and the qualities you're learning how to let go: Those are the things you need to know in the mind.

So you've got the body, you've got feelings, you've got the state of the mind, and then the qualities that come up in the mind. All four frames of reference are right here, it's simply a matter of developing the right qualities. On their own, these things are not foundations of mindfulness. Actually when the Buddha's talking about satipatthana, he's not talking about foundations of mindfulness. He's focusing more on the act of establishing mindfulness. You can focus on any of these four—body, feelings, mind states, mental qualities—but the primary focus should be at the breath. As the Buddha said, when you're working properly with the breath, all the other frames of reference come together right here. This is why this is such an important topic of meditation.

But simply being right here is not enough. Some people, when they hear that, find it kind of discouraging. It's as if you've climbed to what you thought was the top of a mountain and then you discover it's just one little secondary peak and there's more to do. But the work is good, because it goes deep down inside the mind to figure out: Where is it that you're causing yourself suffering? What can you do to put an end to that? There are things you want to develop and things you want to let go of. Learning how to delight in the developing and delight in the letting go: That's what gets you on the right path.

Otherwise, you can know all the techniques for dealing with hindrances and all the techniques for dealing with giving rise to the factors for awakening, but if there's no delight in using them, you go through the motions and you say, "These things don't work." You have to have the motivation, you have to have the sense that this really is accomplishing something important and it's really where you want to go.

That's what kept the Buddha going all those years: his sense that if he didn't stick with the path, he was just going to have to come back and suffer again and again and again. He'd had enough. He didn't want to do that again.

All this comes under the right effort, directed by your mindfulness and your right view. In other words, as the Buddha says, you have to generate desire. That's what keeps the effort going. It's what keeps things from drying up.

All these factors work together, and our job as we're meditating is to learn how to bring them into balance and to use whatever is needed. That's one of the other functions of

mindfulness: to remember what are the possible things you could be doing right improve the state of your mind right now. What can you remember? If something is relevant, you bring it in. It's not as if you're here with everything carried around in your memory all the time. But when the mind is quiet, it does have more access. It's as if there are lots of drawers in the mind that you can access only when you're really still and you're sitting here surrounded by the drawers. When something comes up in the breath that doesn't seem quite right, or something comes up in the mind that doesn't seem quite right, which drawer has the answer for what you can do? When you're quiet, they're more available. You have a clearer memory of what's in which drawer. Part of this is remembering what has worked; part of it requires your own ingenuity.

Ingenuity is the factor that all too often is overlooked in meditation instructions. You're often told that the path is all laid out, all the techniques are right there, all you have to do is just put your nose to the grindstone and just keep grinding away. That may make flour, but it doesn't develop any discernment. Discernment comes from figuring out what's right, what's working, what's not working—and if something's not working, what could you do otherwise? How can you reframe the question to see things from another angle? Because that ability to reframe things is going to be really important all along the path.

So you want to bring all these things together right here. When the mind is still with the breath, this is where they're all accessible. Don't think you have to go anywhere else. You're in the right spot. It's simply a matter of figuring out what to do while you're here.

Because meditation *is* a doing, it's a kind of action. As the Buddha said, it's the karma that puts an end to karma—not by burning karma away but by taking you to a place that lies beyond karma.

But that requires that you get really sensitive to what you're doing right now. Again, this is why we're with the breath. If the mind wobbles away from the breath, you know something's happening. It's moving. If you don't have a clear reference point like this, it's very easy to drift around and not know that you're drifting at all. But here you've got this reference point.

So get to know this spot. The longer you stay here and the more you ask the right questions about being here, the more you see the potentials opening up. Because this is where they do open up.

We're looking for freedom. And where do we know freedom in our lives? Only at one spot, in the fact that we have choices in the present moment. That's something worth looking into. What choices do you have right now? How is it that you're free to choose? If you're at the breath, you're in a really good place to see.