

## *Watch the Mind at the Breath*

*September 5, 2013*

Take a couple of good long deep in-and-out breaths, both to refresh the body and to make it easy for the mind to stay with the breath, so that you notice where you feel the process of the breathing.

Keep that up as long as deep breathing feels good. When it feels like it's too much, then you can adjust it. But try to keep it strong enough so that you can stay focused on it. If your focus is very precise, the breath doesn't have to be all that strong. But when you're starting out, it's good to have a breath that you can stay with. It's not too refined. Otherwise, you get lost.

We're training the mind, we want to observe the mind, and to do so you need a place to focus the mind. If the mind isn't focused, then you don't know where you're going to watch it. But when you focus on the breath, at the very least you've got a place where you can compare the movements of the mind.

It's like watching the movements of clouds. You see some clouds moving in one direction, other clouds moving in another direction. If you're just looking up in the sky, you can't be sure which clouds are standing still and which ones are moving. But if you've got something on the ground or connected to the ground like a tree or a telephone pole or the top of a roof to take as a point of reference, you can focus there and can gauge the movements of the clouds—which ones are moving, which ones are standing still.

And it's the same with the mind. There are lots of movements going on in the mind right now. If you want to see them clearly, you have to have a spot against which you can measure them.

So take the breath as that spot: your sense of the energy in the body as you feel it from within. You can focus anywhere in the body that feels comfortable. Some people find it natural to focus in the head, others find it more natural to focus down in the chest. If you find that focusing in the head gives you a headache, don't focus there. Start down at the neck and then move down.

Wherever you focus, think of the breath energy coming in and out of the body right there, so you don't have pull it in from anywhere else in the body. We're thinking here of the breath as the energy—not so much the air coming in and out of the lungs but the energy that brings the air in and then allows it to go out. It's like a tide rising and falling in the body.

You start out at one spot. When that spot gets comfortable, you do have to expand your awareness. If you're focused in the head, think of the whole head. In

the chest, think of the whole torso. You need a larger frame of reference so that you don't lose your focus as the breath gets more refined.

And it's important that whatever feelings of ease and well-being come up, you don't focus your primary attention on them. You notice that they're there, but they're not your focus. The focus has to be the energy and the *quality* of the energy. Eventually it's going to grow still, and if your only concept of the breath is in-and-out breathing, then you're up a creek. But if you realize that there is a still energy permeating the body, and as long as your frame of reference is large enough, then you can hold that still energy in mind. That can then be your reference: just the simple sense of having a body here, the presence of the body. As to whether the energy is moving or not, after a while that becomes irrelevant. You've got your foundation.

You'll see that the mind will stay there for a while and then has a habit of moving off. It'll move. Sometimes the movements caused simply because the mind is so used to moving. It doesn't feel right to settle down. But you have to keep reminding it: This is where you want to stay because things can develop when you stay. If you don't stay right here, they don't develop.

It's like planting a tree. If you want the tree to grow, you leave it in one spot. If you plant it here and then you say, "Whoops! The sun has moved, the shade has moved, you've got to keep it in the sun," you take it out of the shade and replant it someplace in the sun. Then after a while, the shade extends there and you dig it up again and move it someplace else where there's sun. If you do that, the tree's going to die. You have to realize that it has its time in the shade, it has its time in the sun, and that's okay—as long as its roots get a place to settle down. That's the important thing.

You want your mind to be rooted, to have a sense of awareness that feels like it belongs here. When you're trying to watch the movements of the mind, you'll see that the first thing you do is to just jump into them and run off with them. That's what you've been doing all along, so you need something to resist that: a sense of being firmly rooted right here.

That's one of the ways in which full-body awareness helps. As long as you maintain your awareness as broad as possible, it's too big to jump into those little thought-worlds. It's when your awareness is focused in a small spot that it can easily slip into the tiniest little thought-world and go off. So keep your awareness broad. Keep it larger than the thought-worlds that come floating through. That's when you can observe them. You look at them from outside.

The Buddha said that he got on the right path when he was able to observe his thoughts, not so much as to their content as to what was motivating them: where

they were coming from and where they would lead, in the sense of what impact they would have on the mind. He noticed that thoughts of sensuality, thoughts of ill-will, and thoughts of harmfulness were going to have a bad impact. Thoughts of renunciation, goodwill, or harmlessness would have a good impact. So he did his best to drop the unskillful thoughts.

When you think about being mindful of mind states, all too often you hear, “Well it’s just a matter of watching whatever comes and whatever goes and learning how to be okay with whatever comes and goes.” But the Buddha never taught that. He said that if anything unskillful comes up in the mind, you have to use all your mindfulness to get rid of it.

In other words, try to remember that getting rid of it should take top priority. Remember that you’re not going to slip into it and remember whatever techniques you’ve used in the past that have gotten results. That’s what mindfulness means there: this quality of memory.

Then you use your alertness and your ardency and all your other skillful qualities to help make sure that the unskillful state doesn’t take root. It’s the same as when your head is on fire. You don’t just sit there and look at the flames and notice, “Oh, there’s the red and there’s the yellow and there’s the heat and...” You’re going to die. You’ve got to put out the fire right away. When greed, aversion, and delusion come into the mind, you use your mindfulness and ardency to put them out.

One of the advantages of staying with the breath like this is that you detect these fires when they’re small sparks, tiny little flames just beginning to get started, and you can snuff them out before your head catches on fire.

So try to keep these unskillful thoughts in check. As for skillful thoughts, you can think them, but if you think about them all day and all night, the mind gets tired. This is why the mind needs a place to rest, because when the mind starts getting tired, it can slip very easily back into its unskillful states.

So the concentration here is needed. Full-body awareness is needed. They allow you to watch your thoughts and emotions from the outside. You have something to measure the movements against. Try to see them when they’re small, when they’re just little tiny flames, little tiny sparks, little stirrings right at the border between your sense of the body and your sense of awareness. If you can catch them then, they’re not going to cause any trouble.

If you want to know your mind, get it focused. And then from the focus, fill the whole body with your awareness. That’s when you can really get to know the mind: what it’s like when it’s still, what it’s like when the movements come, and how you can begin to recognize from a slight movement whether it’s going to be

skillful or not, something worth following or not. You're more in control.

As the Buddha said, one of the advantages of training the mind is that you think any thought you want to think and you don't have to think any thought you don't—which means that you need a place to stand outside of your thoughts so that you can judge them in time. You're in a position where you can use your tools to extract yourself from anything that's going to take you in a direction you don't want to go. That's what it means to be mindful of what's going on in the mind.