

Change Your Habits

November 7, 2013

People come up with different excuses for not meditating. One of the most common ones is that their minds are too scattered to meditate, which is like saying you're too sick to go see the doctor or too sick to take your medicine. The whole point of practicing meditation is to change your habits.

The fact that your mind is scattered is a habit that you've been developing. Unfortunately, our culture seems to be really pushing people in that direction with a lot of multi-tasking and multi-playing, multi-entertainment—multi-conversations going on all the time with the person you're talking to and the person you're texting, usually at the same time. The mind gets fragmented all over the place and as a result gets really sloppy in its habits.

If you see that your habits of mind are heading in that direction, you've got to take the initiative in changing them, realizing that your habits are things that go with you. You can stay here and have lots of nice material things. And here we are in a very pleasant environment. It's quiet. The air is good. Right now, the temperature is just right. But those aren't things you can take with you. What you can take with you are the habits you develop.

Right now as we sit, we're developing a habit of truthfulness. In other words, we make up our minds to do something good and we try to stick with that intention. Even when it gets difficult, try to do your best to keep coming back, coming back. You're going to stay with the breath. That's what you've got in mind right now. Then you try to figure out how to do it. It's not just through force of will that the mind is going to stay. You need strategies; you need tactics.

This is why we work with the breath energy—trying to make it interesting, trying to make it comfortable—learning how to use the breath to compensate for whatever's wrong with the body right now. With the change in the air pressure today, a lot of us got headaches. Well, you can breathe in a way that can compensate for that. I've found often that if you breathe really deeply and expand your abdomen as much as you can, even to the point of being a little bit painful, and you keep that up for a while, you oxygenate the blood. You feel a lot better.

When you're tired, what way of breathing gives you energy? When you're feeling tense, what kind of breathing relaxes you? This is something you can learn by watching the breath. It's not just in, out, in, out, in, out. There are qualities to the breath, qualities to its ins and outs. And those qualities have an impact.

This is where you're going to learn about karma. You intend to breathe in a certain way, and then you see what happens with that intention. If it's not skillful and it's not getting the results you want, then you change. This is how we learn, by experimenting. This is an experiment we're working with right now, to see what ways we can get the mind interested in the breath, and what ways we can use that interest to help with the body and help with the mind.

And we stick with it. We've got a whole hour, which is not much time, you realize, out of a day. There are 24 hours in a single day. How many hours do you meditate? If you're developing one kind of habit as you go through the day, and then try to develop another kind of habit when you meditate, it's going to be difficult to make headway. But if you realize that the mind meditating right now is the same mind that speaks to other people, that runs your body, makes plans for the future and thinks about the past—it's all the same mind—then the question becomes: What habits of mind are you developing as you go through the day?

The Thai word for habit, *nisai*, comes from the Pali word for dependence. In other words, when a young monk goes to live with a senior monk, he lives in dependence on the senior monk. It's the same relationship as we used to have in the West between masters and apprentices. The apprentice tried to help the master and at the same time, was trying to learn how to pick up skills. And the skills involved a lot of habits: how you approach something.

I knew someone at one time who had gone to study how to make pottery with one of those living national treasures in Japan. When she first got there, she was very discouraged. She'd put her pots into the kiln. The next day, they'd come out, and lots of them would be broken, burned, whatever. But his pots were always coming out perfect, perfect, perfect every time. She was wondering how she could learn anything from him until one day, she came into the studio and discovered that his pots had burned. He was sitting in the kiln trying to figure out why. What had he done wrong? She realized that was the habit she needed to pick up from him: When something goes wrong, you don't get discouraged. You just go and look at it and try to figure it out.

This is a really important habit, and it applies not only when you're working with manual skills. It applies to all the skills of your life. You want to look at the way you speak with other people, the way you interact with other people. Is it working? Is it not? Are you drawing people to you, or are you driving them away by your habits? Sometimes we can intentionally drive people away, but other times, it seems to be that we try to be nice, but for some reason, people go away. Well, what are we doing? What are we saying?

The ability to look at yourself in all fairness and to admit your mistakes: That's how you grow, and that's a habit you want to develop. In other words, you don't get knocked over by the results of your own unskillful behavior. You pick yourself up, dust yourself off, and keep going.

I remember reading about an Olympic swimmer who was expected to sweep all the gold medals in one of the Olympic Games. And the very first race that he swam in, he didn't get the gold medal. All the commentators were saying, "Oh, that's it. He's going to go into a downward spiral now." And his coach said, "No, that's not the kind of person he is." Sure enough, he won all the remaining races; he didn't let that one setback knock him off course.

So when things don't go well, stop and look. See what you're doing wrong and be true to yourself. Remember when the Buddha was teaching Rahula, the first thing he said about looking at your own behavior was that you have to be truthful. Of all the precepts, this is the most important. It means being true both to yourself and to other people. Only when you can admit the truth can you learn from the truth, and then learn other truths that you hadn't even suspected before. This is a habit you've got to develop.

So here we are, working on this habit. We've made up our minds that we're going to stay here with the breath. If the mind wanders off, you bring it back. It wanders off again? You bring it back again: five times, ten times, until the point where you lose count. You keep bringing it back, and you ask yourself: Why does it keep wandering off? What can I change in the breath? What can I change in the way I approach things?

Sometimes you get back to the breath and you're like an addict. You say, "Okay, I slipped off then, but I'm not going to go back ever again." Then five minutes later, you find yourself off, just like the addict who's decided he's not going to smoke pot ever again. He swears up and down, "I'm a new person." Then the next thing you know, you hear him say, "Oops, I fell again." If you know that you have a tendency to fall, watch out for it. Anticipate it. Look for the warning signs.

The important thing is that you not get overwhelmed by the fact that things are not going well—because look at human life as a whole. Things don't go well in human life. The body ages, gets sick, and dies. Nobody wants that, but it happens. We have to develop the kind of habit that's not fazed by aging, not fazed by illness, not even fazed by death. You try to develop the warrior spirit that's not overwhelmed by anything. When the battle's not going well, the people who run away are sure to lose. It's not that great soldiers never have setbacks. They have

setbacks, but they learn how not to get overwhelmed by them. They take them as a challenge.

Aging is a setback. Illness is a setback. Death is the ultimate one, but you don't have to be overwhelmed by it. This is the good news offered by the Buddha: that you can train the mind so that none of these things will faze you. None of them will overwhelm you. So you keep working away and away and away at this habit of being truthful, not letting setbacks knock you off course. You just keep coming back, coming back.

There's that story about the young man in the Midwest who was going to come out to California and try his luck at the movie industry. He had a Zen teacher. He went to see his Zen teacher to say goodbye, and the Zen teacher said, "What are you going to do if you get there and they knock you down?" And the guy said, "Well, I guess I'll just have to accept it." The teacher said, "No. They knock you down; you get back up again. They knock you down again; you get back up again. That's the kind of habit you want to develop."

Where are you going to develop it? By developing strength of mind. And how do you develop strength of mind? Through what we're doing right here, right now: getting the mind to stay in one place. Strength isn't just brute force. Strength comes from your conviction, your persistence, your mindfulness, your concentration, your discernment. Figuring things out is the ultimate strength. Of the five strengths the Buddha talked about, discernment is the big one.

Ajaan Lee has a nice quote. He says for a person with discernment, all you need is a machete and you can set yourself up in life. Even if you have nothing else, the discernment is what will see you through. And that is a strength, which means that if the mind is being recalcitrant, you don't just push, push, push. You try to figure out, "What's the problem?" And experiment. Try things out. You keep at it again and again and again, knowing that this is a problem that *can* be solved.

If you don't see the solution quite yet, you just keep looking, looking, looking, trying things out and looking again. You don't give up. That's the kind of habit you want to develop. That's when you have the habit of a meditator.