

Hunting & Foraging

July 5, 2014

Breathe long and deep to see where you feel the energy move in the body as you breathe. Wherever it's most blatant, wherever it's easiest to follow, let your attention settle right there. That's your focal point—or, as they call it in Pali, your support. You're going to be watching the mind, but first you've got to give yourself a place to stay where you can watch it. So you watch the breath first and try to notice what kind of breathing is most comfortable. If long breathing feels comfortable, keep it up. If not, you can change. Try shorter breathing, more shallow or even longer still, deeper still, heavy, light, fast, slow. Experiment to see what feels best right now. Or you can simply pose a question in the mind each time you breath in: What would feel good right now for this breath? What does the body need in terms of breath energy?

The more you get familiar with the sense of movement of the energy through the body, the more precisely you'll be able to send the breath to parts of the body that have seemed starved, that need some more breath energy, to avoid overworking the parts of the body that are tired. You really want to get to know the movement of the breath energy in the body—which means that when we talk about the breath, it's not just the air coming in and out of the lungs. It's the movement of energy that allows it to come in and out of the lungs. Sometimes it'll be very blatant; sometimes it'll be very subtle. Sometimes it'll feel like there's no movement at all, but as long as you're not suppressing anything, that's okay. The body will breathe when it needs to.

You're just here to help nudge things along so that the mind has a good solid place to stay from which it can observe itself. This is a quality called alertness. You're aware of the breath and at the same time you're aware of the mind as it relates to the breath. If you find that the breath is getting too subtle to notice, breathe a little bit more heavily. Breathe in a way that the body and the mind feel snug and comfortable together, at ease together, because you're going to be here for a long time. You want to watch the mind in the present moment, and the breath is your guarantee that you're in the present moment as you're watching it—because sometimes it's easy, when you try to watch the thoughts come through the mind, that you just get into the thoughts and ride off with them. But when you're with the breath, you know you're in the present.

This allows the mind to settle down and it really helps in gaining some insight into yourself

in several ways. One is that it just feels good being here, and when you're feeling good, it's a lot easier to admit to yourself areas where you've been unskillful, so that you can resolve to not repeat the mistake. If you don't admit the mistake—and it's usually because you're in no mood to hear about your own mistakes or to admit to them—then there's no way you can solve the big problem, which is the unnecessary stress and suffering we cause ourselves. So try to feel at ease with the breath.

Ajaan Suwat would talk about having a sense of confidence, a sense of pleasure being here: "You're here to do a good thing, training the mind, nourishing the mind." So if you come with the right mood, you establish one of the necessary steps in gaining insight into the mind.

Of course, one of the first things you'll see is how quickly the mind moves away. Well, learn from that. Come back to the breath, drop whatever that thought was, and reward yourself for coming back. Ask yourself what kind of breathing would feel really good right now. Are there any areas you were overlooking before? Then the mind will slip away again. Well, you bring it back again. It's not so much you actually bring it back, you just drop the thought and your mind will be right here with the breath.

After a while, you get more sensitive to the warning signals that the mind is about to run away. Breathe deeply a couple of times and you re-establish yourself here with the breath.

And you'll learn lots of other things about the mind simply in the process of getting it to settle down.

Once it's settled down, then you try to keep it here. Of course, you'll be dealing with all the voices in the committee of the mind that say you've got to think about this or here's an opportunity to think about that. You've got a whole hour here: You could think about all kinds of things. You have to re-instate your resolve you're going to stay right here. That, too, is a skill.

It may seem like nothing is happening, but it's like being a hunter. You never know when the animal is going to come, so you have to be alert and quiet all at the same time, continually. If there are any lapses in your alertness, you'll miss the little signals that tell you that the animal is about to approach. So you have to be fully alert, steadily alert—and very still. If you move around, the animal's going to hear you and run away. As for when it's going to come and what kind of animal it's going to be, you have no idea. You may have some general ideas that rabbits frequent a certain place, or squirrels another place. But you're never ever sure what animal is going to come, and whether it's going to be something you want or not.

It's the same with the insights you get into the mind. Sometimes they will be insights that you don't really want, but they have their uses. But at the same time you don't want to be stuck with just one technique.

When I was up in Canada recently, a big argument was going on about how to design the math curriculum there. Some people were favoring a system where the kids were encouraged to explore and try to figure out the problem before they solved it. In other words, give them practice in framing the problem themselves. And there were people saying, "There are lots of kids who've suddenly found math a lot more interesting that way." But then there were other educators who were saying, "Well, no, the kids find it confusing. They should just be taught how to memorize their multiplication tables and their division tables, and *then* we can talk about being a little bit more creative."

The answer, of course, is that both are right. There's no one way of teaching math that's going to work for everybody. And your mind is a lot more complicated than math, and so there's no one way that one particular approach to trying to gain insight into the mind is going to work in all cases. Think of the mind as like a whole classroom of kids. They each have their strengths and weaknesses in how they learn. You've got to have lots of different techniques for teaching them.

I had a student whose calculus professor taught calculus six different ways in the course of their semester and was able to get everybody on board. If you didn't understand it one way, well, try another way. And it's the same with the mind.

In a lot of cases, simply trying to get the mind to stay still, keep it still, and then being very watchful as to any movements where it's going to go out and think about this, or create a thought about that: Just that technique is enough to give you some important insights.

In other cases, you have to notice that you have a specific problem. Anger may be your problem or lust, fear, greed, jealousy, thoughts about the past that you don't like to dwell on, incidents that you go over and over again in your mind. In cases like that, you have to ask yourself: What pleasure do you get out of this?

The Buddha would actually have you ask five questions there.

The first two questions are: How does that thinking arise? And how does it disappear? You watch that kind of thinking coming and going so that you can understand exactly where the trigger is when it comes, and what causes it to disappear.

Then you ask yourself: What's the attraction for that kind of thinking? Sometimes

thoughts like this are things that we don't think we like, and it's hard for us to admit that there is a part of us that likes this thing. So you have to look for that, to see where you think you're getting something out of this.

Then try to see that it's not really worth it. This is where the teaching on things being inconstant and stressful and not-self comes in. In other words, the pleasure you get is not really lasting, or it's not really pleasure, or it's something that you don't really gain anything from. It's not under your control. It's not something you can stash away and keep with you.

The Buddha has a long list of other elaborations on these ideas. You may see a particular way of thinking that's like a cancer that keeps growing and growing, or as alien: It's as if a stranger has come in and taken over your mind. Or it's an arrow that you shoot yourself with. There are lots of ways of getting at this angle of seeing that the pleasure you get out of particular ways of thinking is not really worth it.

Then, when you have that kind of all-around knowledge about whatever the distraction is or whatever your preoccupation is, you can develop dispassion for it, which is the escape from it.

This means that there's no one-size-fits-all approach to meditation. The breath is the Buddha's most frequent topic to get people started because it's something that's personal to everybody, and getting to know your breath really does give you a good foundation, a good place to come back to because, as he said, it clears away the unskillful results of other kinds of meditation. Sometimes when you're trying to fight off lust and you start thinking of what's inside the body that you're lusting for, it can get pretty depressing. But it's not meant to get you depressed, just dispassionate. So to counteract the depression, you pull out and stay with the breath. As the Buddha said, it's like rain that clears away the dust at the end of the hot season in India. The breath clears unskillful states out of the mind.

So the breath is a good place to start. As Ajaan Lee said, it's like your home base. Other ways of meditating are places where you go foraging. If you want mushrooms, you have to go to a certain grove. If you want bamboo shoots you have to go to another grove. So you have to look at your mind to get a sense of what its problems are. Some of the problems can simply be solved by the process of getting the mind still and clearing away a lot of the underbrush that keeps it from getting still, or clearing away the things that start growing, once it's still, that pull you away. In other cases, you have to pose other questions. A lot of insight is just that—learning which questions are going to work—and the only way you can learn that is by trial and

error.

The Buddha gives some general outlines for questions that don't work. Asking yourself about your true identity is one that doesn't work. Others include getting concerned about whether the world is eternal or is not eternal, or whether there's a creator God or no creator God. The Buddha said, "Just put those questions aside. They're not helpful in solving the problem of suffering." Is the world all a Oneness, or are we all separate? That's not a useful question either. The useful questions are, "What am I doing?" "What are the results?" "Are they worth it?" All the other questions the Buddha recommends are variations on that, but you have to cook up the variations yourself.

So you're hunting and foraging here—trying to clear away the things that are useless in the mind and to find the things of value—and as with any hunter or forager, you have to have lots of techniques. You have your basic skill, which is the breath, and then you learn to build on that. As long as you're not really solid with the breath, stay right here. Try not to get distracted with other things. Make sure your home base is really solid. And sometimes just maintaining your home base will do a lot. Sometimes the animals will come right here. Sometimes you'll discover that the vegetables and other forest delicacies that you want are right here.

Other times, you've got a specific disease and the medicine is on the other side of the mountain or requires that you take something that's right here and you fix it in a different way.

So remember that insight will come in a way that you wouldn't expect, and you can't force it on the mind, but you *can* create the conditions where the mind gains the ingenuity to see things in a new way.

"To pry things out, use your ingenuity," Ajaan Fuang would often say. "Experiment. Observe what results you get." And it's in the process of experimenting and observing: That's how you learn. In Ajaan Lee's discussions of mindfulness, he talks about how the quality of ardency, trying to do this skillfully, is what really gives you your discernment. In his discussions of concentration, it's the evaluation, seeing when things are going right, seeing when they're not going right, trying to figure out a way in which to help them to go right: That's the source of discernment. They're basically the same thing, being ardent and using your evaluation. That's how you gain the discernment and the insight you want.