

Distraction & Drowsiness

August 14, 2015

Try to put aside all your other concerns and just be with the breath. This is called being with the body in and of itself, as opposed to being with the body in the world.

As we go through the world in the course of the day, the body plays lots of different roles, and the questions are: Is it strong enough to do the work you want? Is it attractive enough to the people around you that you're not embarrassed to be around them? Is it healthy? Those are the questions we tend to ask when we think about the body in the world.

But if you've got the body just in and of itself, it's just this experience right here of having a body, inhabiting the body. When things settle down in the mind, the most obvious thing that's going on in the body is the breath. Now, there may be pains in different parts of the body, but put those aside for the time being. You want to work first with the breath.

Notice how it feels when you breathe in, how it feels when you breathe out. Notice the flow of energy. If it feels good, keep up that rhythm. If it doesn't feel good, you can change. This is called evaluation. You're trying to figure out what's the best place for the mind to settle down. The breath has lots of possibilities, so you want to explore them. Evaluation is one of the factors of right concentration. You bring it together with singleness of preoccupation. In other words, just keep it right with one thing: the breath.

Ajaan Lee's image is of holding on to a post as you run around and around and around. As long as you're holding on to the post, you're okay. If you let go of the post and try running around in circles, though, you get dizzy and fall down. If your thinking spins off onto other topics, you're going to get dizzy—in other words, your concentration is not going to get solid. But if you hold on to the breath and think about the breath for a while, you actually get deeper and deeper into concentration.

This sort of evaluation is not just one step to get through as quickly as possible. You want to do the work well, because you're basically creating a place to lie down. If you're going to lie down, you want to lie down in a comfortable spot. If your bed has lots of bed bugs and dirt and other things, it's not going to be a good place to lie down. If people have left toys on the bed, then if you try to lie down, the toys dig into you. Try to clean things away.

So work with the breath energy so that it feels good coming in, feels good

going out. You begin to realize that the energy is there not just at the nose or in the chest or in the abdomen, but that you can feel it in other places in the body as well. So think of the whole body breathing in, the whole body breathing out. This helps to settle you in even more. Once the breath feels really good and feels like it's filling the body, you can put aside some of the evaluation and just be with the sensation of breath that feels good. That way, the mind gets more rest in the present moment. But if you try to stop your evaluation when you're not really ready, you can start drifting off.

Our two main problems as we try to get the mind to settle down are distraction on the one hand and drowsiness on the other: what the Buddha calls a scattered mind as opposed to a constricted mind.

The scattered mind is beset with thoughts going all over the place, while you try to follow them, either out of interest or exasperation: "Here I am, trying to get my mind to settle down," you say to yourself, "and all these thoughts keep going." So you try to put a stop to them. It's like playing whack-a-mole. You hit one mole over the head, and another one comes up. You hit that one over the head, another comes up.

What you've got to do in cases like that is just tell yourself you're not interested. Think of these thoughts simply as voices in your head. There's a committee in there, and the different members of the committee have different ideas. Some of the tapes they're playing are things that were actually set into motion a while back. Now that your mind is beginning to calm down a little bit and get quieter, you're beginning to hear things going on in the background that were obscured before.

So one of the best ways of dealing with these thoughts is just not to get involved. If you get really sensitive to the breath, you realize that every time one of these thoughts comes in, there's going to be a corresponding pattern of tension in the body. If you can locate that pattern of tension... It comes up as the thought arises and it goes when the thought stops for a bit. But sometimes it stays there as if you're holding a marker so that you can think about the thought some more. As soon as you sense that pattern of tension, just let it go. Think of it dissolving: Breathe into it and let it dissolve away.

The important thing is not to get involved with your thoughts. The only thoughts you should get involved with are those dealing with the breath. As long as you don't pay attention to thoughts on other topics, eventually they'll fade away, fade away. It may take time, but don't be impatient. They're not your responsibility right now. Your responsibility is to be with the breath.

The other problem, of course, is drowsiness. The best way to deal with that is

to give yourself something to do with the breath. This is one of the reasons why, once the breath gets comfortable, we recommend that you expand it to different parts of the body. Think of the breath going down into the stomach, going deeper into the abdomen. Then move your focus of attention down around the different parts of the body. To the left, to the right. Up to the solar plexus: left, right. Up to the chest: left, right. Your throat. Your head. Down the back, out the legs; down your shoulders, out the arms. Move the breath around for a while and notice how the body's holding its posture: where it's too tense and where you can relax it and still maintain a straight posture. Or you can think about the breath going to different organs in the body. If you know that you have a disease or an unhealthy condition in some part of the body, think of the breath going into that part and then through it, cleaning it out. If you have a pain in some part of the body, think of the breath going through the pain. In other words, give yourself something to do with the breath.

As you get to know the body better in this way and your range of awareness begins to spread and fill the body, you're preparing the mind for a really solid state of concentration.

So when you're dealing with evaluation, it's a helpful type of thinking that brings you to stillness. You don't arrive at stillness by just forbidding yourself from thinking. After all, the act of forbidding itself is a kind of thought and not necessarily the most skillful one.

It's more skillful to work with the topic of your concentration and see what it can do, so that when you're with the breath, it's not just in, out, in-and-out; but it's in-long and out-short, or in-short and out-long; in-comfortable, out-uncomfortable, whatever. Then you can work with it. Don't just sit with whatever's there.

As the Buddha said, the mind is an active process. It doesn't just sit around receiving stimuli and then being kicked around by the stimuli to do something. It's out there looking for things. It's shaping its experience. To see that, you want to try to shape your experience well. The more hands-on practice you get with shaping your experience, the better you know this process of how the mind is active, when it's skillful, and when it's not.

So you're evaluating your way to stillness. In doing so, you're creating the kind of stillness that makes it possible to see the mind with a lot more clarity, a lot more subtlety, and from a more balanced state of energy. So learn how to do your evaluation well, because it makes your concentration stronger—and provides a good basis for discernment to arise as well.