

Present Kamma

September 6, 2015

There's a nice breeze outside. And you've got your breeze inside, i.e., the breath, so pay attention to the inside breeze.

The Buddha has us ask ourselves a question everyday: "Days and nights fly past, fly past. What am I becoming right now?" or "What am I doing right now?" If the Buddha were here to ask you that question, how would you respond?

The best response is to say, "I'm training my mind." What do you do to train the mind? There's the karma of the present moment, and it's made up of three things that you want to focus on. The first is your intention. Right now, your intention is to get the mind into a state of stillness. You do that by focusing on the breath. In the beginning, it may not be all that still as you try to focus on the breath. But that's the important place you want to focus right now. Put your attention on the breath and try to stay with the breath as much as you can.

And whatever you need to do to stay there, that's what you've got to do. As you become better and better at it, you find that it gets easier and easier. It's like walking. When we first learned to walk, we didn't know which muscles of the body were necessary and which ones were not. So we tended to stiffen up all kinds of unnecessary muscles in the back and the arms and our face as we took a step and then the next step. Then, over time, we began to notice that we could take the steps without tensing up so much. The next thing we knew, we were running around the house without even thinking about it.

In the same way, when you settle down with the breath, you've got to do a lot of thinking about settling down. And you have to fight with some other intentions. That's where you use the other two things that you want to focus on, which the Buddha calls perception and attention.

Perceptions are the images you hold in mind. They can either be words or pictures. For instance, your perception right now is the perception of the breath. When you breathe in and out, when you think about it, what's the picture you hold in mind about the breathing? Where does that breath come in? Where does it go out? You might want to survey your body to see where the feeling of energy flow is, because that's what you want to focus on.

Now, the breath might not be doing what you think it should be doing. You might think that you have to pull the breath up through the nose, and that creates a subconscious picture in the mind of pulling something up. You find that you can give yourself a headache if you hold that perception in mind. So change the perception.

Think of the body being like a big sponge. As you breathe in, the body expands and the air comes into all the holes in the sponge, going deep down inside the sponge. As you breathe out the, the sponge contracts a little bit. Just hold that image in mind. See if that makes the breathing easier, makes it more pleasant to be with.

The third quality the Buddha talks about is attention. Usually when he talks about attention, he's talking about the questions you ask yourself. So the questions right now are, "Is the breath comfortable? Is it easy to stay with the breath? If it's not easy to stay with the breath, what can you change?" You can change your focal point. Where is the spot in the body where you're paying the most attention? Maybe you can move that around.

Or how about the quality of the breathing? What kind of breathing might be better to stay with? How do you change that in a way where you don't put too much pressure on it? If you put a lot of pressure on it, you start spreading tension around rather than spreading good breath energy around. So you have to think in terms of *allowing*. Getting back to the issue of perception: If you're allowing the breath to go through the body, you don't have to push it through. You allow it in. You allow it out. You don't get in the way.

If your mind feels really antsy and wants to think about something else, ask yourself, "Why do you want to think about that?" The mind will come up with its reasons. Sometimes it says, "I've got to think about this, and here's a nice whole hour where I have nothing else to do. Got lots of time to think." You can think anytime.

Now you've got a different issue: the issue of how to be able to get the mind under control. As I was saying this morning, when the mind is not under your control, you can't really trust yourself. The actions that come out—your thoughts and your words and your deeds: You don't know if they're going to be good or bad if you're not really paying attention, if you don't have the mindfulness, you don't have the alertness to keep alert to what's going on to see what kind of intentions you're acting on, what kind of perceptions you're holding in mind, because sometimes your perceptions are causing you trouble.

So if you have the perception that the other thought that would pull you from the breath is going to be interesting or entertaining or worthwhile, learn how to perceive it another way. It's invading your space. It's getting in the way of something you really want to do. You really want to train the mind.

So it's all a question of intention, attention, and perception. These are the things you want to focus on to see what you're doing in the present moment—particularly, on what the mind is doing. These things can make the difference between whether you're going to sit here carrying out your original intention, or if you're going to sit here doing something else.

The original intention was for your own good. You need to get the mind trained. You notice this as you go through life. Sometimes little events in the day can get you upset for days afterwards. Or something that other people said just echoes and reverberates inside your head. They forgot about it a long time ago, but you can pull out that recording and go over it again and again and again. Even though it's getting you upset, you still keep doing it.

Why is that? It's because the mind isn't really paying attention to itself. It doesn't understand itself, doesn't understand what it's doing in the present moment. So when the Buddha teaches about attention and intention and perception, he's teaching us some tools to use to take the present moment apart so that we can understand what's getting in the way of our peace of mind.

For example, you may have some other hidden intentions that are lying in wait. Once the mind gets a little bit still, they're going to move right in. You have to be on the alert for that. Watch for that. When they sneak in, tell yourself, "These are not my friends anymore. They used to be my friends, in fact they were so friendly that I actually thought they were me. They were my intentions."

But look at them now: They're coming in and messing up what you really want to do, which is to get your mind trained. So for the time being, you have to look at them as strangers. Remind yourself that even though other things may come into the mind, the breath is still coming in and going out. The thoughts don't destroy the breath, it's simply a question of: Where are you focusing your attention? Focus your attention back on the breath. Ask yourself, "What kind of breathing is allowing these thoughts to come in? Maybe if I changed the way I breathe, make it more filling, more satisfying, more nourishing, I won't be so interested in these distractions."

This way, if you find a lump of problems in your mind, you can take them apart, and you see that they're not the big solid lump that you thought they were. They're just little events in the mind that happened to come together. But you can pull them out, like an old game of pick-up sticks. Some of the sticks, when you pull them out, don't make much difference in the pile. With other sticks, when you pull them out, the whole thing collapses.

So you keep pulling them out, pulling them out. You find the one that helps the distraction collapse and you're back at the breath. You want to hold that perception of breath in mind as continually as you can. Make that your intention: Pay attention to whatever strategies you can use to make it more interesting to stay there.

You really do want to understand what you're doing in the present moment, because what we do in the present moment makes all the difference in our lives. When people talk about karma, all too often they're focusing on past karma, thinking about what they did in the past. Either you know something specific you did in the past, or you just throw everything back on the general principle of past karma. When things go poorly you say, "Oh that's my past bad karma." When things go well, "Oh that's my past good karma."

The Buddha, though, doesn't have you focus on past karma. He has you focus on present karma—what you're doing right now—because what you're doing right now can make all the difference between whether you're going to suffer from your past karma or not.

If your present karma is skillful—in other words, your attentions and intentions and perceptions are skillful—then even when bad things are coming in from the past, they don't weigh on the mind. But if they're unskillful, even good things coming in from the past can weigh on the mind. They can cause a lot of trouble.

As the Buddha said, if your mind is poorly trained, things come in from the past—and especially if they're bad things coming in from the past—they overwhelm you. It's like a big lump of salt. If you put it into a small cup of water, you can't drink the water because it's too salty. In the same way, if your mind is untrained, it's narrow. It's easily overcome by pleasure and pain. So whatever comes in is going to be unpleasant. But if your mind is well trained, he said it's like a large body of water, a huge river, and the river is clean. You throw that same lump of salt into the river and you can still drink the water, because there's so much more water than salt. When

your mind is well-trained, you can have thoughts of goodwill for all beings, compassion for all beings—without limit; equanimity in all cases where you need it, without limit. That enlarges the mind.

As for training in overcoming pleasure and pain, we learn to do that as we meditate. If pains come up in the meditation, you learn how to deal with them so that the mind doesn't have to suffer. Say there's a pain in your leg. You don't have to stay right there. You can stay in another part of the body. You have the choice. You can pay attention to something else.

Then you can perceive the pain not as "my pain," but as simply a pain that's there, a sensation that's there, when you're trying to develop your foundation of concentration in another part of the body. Once your foundation is good, then you can spread the good energy in that pleasant part of the body over through the painful part of the body and out the other side. That helps to relieve a lot of the tension you might feel around that pain.

When your concentration gets really good, then you can actually investigate the pain to see: Is the pain the same thing as the body? Is the pain the same thing as your awareness? You begin to realize they're not. They're in the same place, but they're on different levels, or different frequencies. So you stay with the frequency of the body or the frequency of awareness, and the pain can be something separate. Once you've learned that skill, then pain is not going to overcome your mind.

As for pleasure, one of the things we try to develop as we concentrate is a sense of pleasure, because that makes it easier for us to let go of things we might otherwise be thirsting after or hungering after outside.

But to maintain that pleasure in concentration, you can't let yourself get overcome by it. If you do, the concentration disintegrates. The fact that you're focused on the breath continually: That's the cause. The pleasure is the result. So you have to learn how to allow the pleasure to be there, but not try to go jump into it like a big pillow. After all, sometimes pillows are like clouds. You jump into what looks like a pillow and you go through the other side. Other pillows will stay there, but everything gets very vague and unclear. But if you simply allow the pleasure to do its work while you continually do your work, you get the benefit from the pleasure. In fact, you can get more benefit from the pleasure that way. Instead of just trying to wallow in it, you let it spread around the whole body.

Think of a pleasant breath coming in the whole body, that big sponge we talked about: coming in, going out, soothing the body, soothing the

mind. This way, you get a lot more use out of the pleasure. At the same time, you're not overcome by it.

So we practice concentration to develop those two skills, being able to not let the mind be overcome by pleasure and not be overcome by pain.

Have a mind that's unlimited. We do that by again thinking of those three things we're doing in the present moment: what our intentions are, what our attention is—what we're paying attention to, and what questions we're asking—and then finally the perceptions we hold in mind. How do we image to ourselves what we're doing? Is it the best image possible, or could we change? How about the questions we're asking? Are they good questions? Or should we change them? What's our intention here?

When you pay attention to these three things, if you notice if there's any stress, pain, sorrow, or whatever weighing down the mind, try and take it apart in terms of these three things. What's your attention? What's your intention? What's your perception?

You find that you get a handle on things, because the way you shape things in the present moment determines how you're going to experience what's coming in from the past. This puts you in charge. You can shape your present moment in better and better ways.

So when the Buddha asks you, "Days and nights are flying past, flying past. What are you doing right now?" you can say, "I'm getting more skillful at shaping my experience, for my benefit and for the benefit of the people around me."

That's an answer you can be proud to give.