

Invest in the Breath

February 12, 2016

Take a couple of good long, deep in and out breaths. If you want, you can use a meditation word along with the breath, *Buddho*: *Bud*, in; *dho*, out. It means awake. It's the quality of mind we're trying to develop here. Notice how the breath feels and where you feel the breath, because the breath isn't just the air coming in and out through the nose. It's also the movement of the body that allows the air to come in and go out. As you get more and more sensitive to that movement, you realize that it affects the entire body, the entire nervous system, all the blood vessels, out to every pore. The more fully you're aware of that, the more you'll be grounded here in the present moment.

If you can't be aware of the whole body all at once, try to see which parts you can be aware of. Go around the body and make a survey. Notice how the breathing feels in the stomach; how it feels in the chest; how it feels in the head. Then you go to the subtler breathing: down the back, in the arms and the legs. Try to settle back into the breath. Be surrounded by the breath. This'll keep you anchored here in the present moment so that you can see what's going on in the present moment with a sense of well-being. The mind is constantly churning out ideas, churning out intentions, and you want to be in a comfortable position where you can see that process in action if you're going to be able to do something about it—and also to investigate these qualities, the qualities you develop as you meditate.

You're making a good investment. The Buddha himself makes a comparison between the practice and investment. You're investing your time in some important skills, the skills you need all the way through life, because these are the things that are going to see you through, even as other aspects of your mind and your body begin to fall away.

When we get this body and get this mind, it's as if we signed on to a deal without reading the fine print. In the beginning, everything seems fine. When you're young, you find that you can do this that you couldn't do yesterday or that you couldn't do last month, and there are more and more things you can do. Your abilities grow. Your command of language grows. Your command of your body grows. You can do more and more things, and it seems like everything is just going to keep on improving. But then it reaches a point where things begin to plateau out and before you realize it, the plateau begins to erode away. Suddenly things that you could do before, you can't do. And the body doesn't warn you ahead of time. It doesn't say, "Okay, in five years, your vision's going to get blurry; or in ten years, you're going to have heart problems." It doesn't say anything. It up and does things. So you have to be prepared for that.

What are you going to depend on as your body begins to erode away, as your mental capabilities begin to erode away? If you've been developing qualities like mindfulness and

alertness, concentration and discernment, you can deal with these problems with a lot more skill, equanimity, and patience, or at least do your best to work around them.

When the Buddha talks about things like inconstancy, stress, and not-self, he doesn't have you start out just by accepting them. He has you work against them. Can you make a state of mind that's constant? We go around talking about how inconstant the world is. But what about yourself? Your mind is even more inconstant. It's like the reflections on water. Can you make the water still so that the reflections grow still? As for stress, can you create a sense of ease in the body and ease in the mind to go against the stress? Can you get these things under your control so it's not totally not-self? When you do, you learn a lot, both about what's constant and what's not; what's easeful and what's not; what you can control and what you can't control. Then as you get older and the area that you can control begins to grow smaller, you still can get a lot out of what you've got left.

There was a woman in Thailand who had cancer, cancer in the bones, and she asked to stay to stay and practice at Ajaan Maha Boowa's monastery. He told her he couldn't look after her physically. All he could do was teach her the Dhamma. So she took along a friend, an older woman in her eighties who was a retired doctor. Every evening, they would go and listen to a Dhamma talk from Ajaan Maha Boowa and record it. Then after the woman with cancer died, the older friend came up with the idea of taking all those tapes and transcribing them.

Even though her eyesight was beginning to fail and her strength was beginning to fail, she said she took heart she from a teaching of Ajaan Maha Boowa's: that as your abilities begin to erode, focus on what you *can* do, what goodness you can squeeze out of what you've still got left. If you focus on what you can't do, it gets depressing. So what good *can* you still do? There are lots of good things you can still do. Focus on those. Use your ingenuity in finding those things. The old doctor kept taking heart from this teaching, and as a result she was able to transcribe all the tapes—more than 80 Dhamma talks.

It's the same principle as using your ingenuity in getting the mind to settle down. You take what seems inconstant—your mind's continually jumping around, irritated with this, irritated with that—and you make it steadier. You try to develop a sense of ease and learn how to focus on that ease. A lot of people have trouble with this. One, because as things get easy, it's hard to keep a clear point as to where you're focused. And two, it's all too easy to fall into that sense of pleasure and lose the breath.

You can't drop the breath. You have to stay there. So, it's important that you be able to make a distinction. Here's the breath. The mind's focused on the breath. And there's a sense of ease. The mind tends to gobble up the ease or wallow in it. It doesn't think too much. Once it gets it, it just likes to throw itself into the ease. Instead, you have to learn how to question it: What's the ease good for? And what's the best way to relate to it? You can use it as a means for spreading awareness through the entire body, to get firmly established in the present.

You also want to learn how to use pains. We tend to run away from the pains. The Buddha says No. You want to question them. What is this thing called pain? When there's a pain in the body, why does it affect the mind? There seems to be a natural connection, but it's actually arbitrary.

So learn how to question these things that you take for granted. It's when you question them that you gain discernment. This way, you can get use out of the things that are stressful, inconstant, and not-self, and also use out if things that are more constant, easeful, and under your control.

Learn how to make these distinctions. See what good you can get out of both sides—because pain has its good side, too, you know. It's a good place for seeing all of the members of the committee of your mind, all the ones that tend to hide out and stay behind the scenes. If you sit with pain for a while, they're going to come up to the surface. Sometimes it's a little discouraging to see how your mind comments to itself on pain and the childish comments it makes. "Why is this happening to me?" Well, of course it's happening to you. You've got a body. Go around and find somebody out there who has a body that doesn't have pain. When these voices come to the surface, then you can deal with them.

It's like that game whack-a-mole—the one where they have all the holes, and these little moles come sticking their heads up out of the holes randomly, and you try to hit them over the head with a plastic hammer. A lot of the moles in our minds tend to stay underground. They don't tend to come up. But when pain comes, they're all going to come up to the surface. They're all going to complain. And usually, we tend to give in to them very easily. But if you learn how to have a little bit of firmness, a little bit of patience, endurance, wisdom in asking questions about the pain and not taking it on as "your pain," you can come to your senses. It's just a pain that's there. It's in the body. And if you wonder, "Why is this happening to me?" Well, you've got a body. Things happen to bodies.

So take a more curious approach to it. Why does this pain in the body have to pain the mind? You find that a lot of it has to do with the labels you place on things. We tend to believe the labels we place on things because we've been using them all our lives. But it's good to call them into question.

Like this idea of breath: We normally think of the breath simply as air coming in and out of the lungs. But for centuries, people have been talking about another kind of breath in the body. And it's good to try on those concepts to see where they help you deal with your body as you sense it from the inside.

English has a very poor vocabulary for this area. Our sciences are very good at describing the body from the outside, what can be measured from the outside, but as for how you experience the body from within, we don't have that many words to describe it. The Buddha talks about the solidity and the energy and the warmth and the coolness, the sense of space that surround the body, and the energy is related to the breath.

So try on his concepts and see what kind of questions they ask about you, about your sense of the body and how you can use them to peel away any attachments, any unskillful ways of approaching your body or relating to the body and relating to your mind. This way, you can find that pleasure has its uses. Pain has its uses.

Physical limitations have their uses as well. You find yourself running up against your ideas of yourself. A skill that you used to have and all of a sudden it's going away: It's as if your arm were cut off. We tend to identify ourselves around our skills: the self as the producer, the part of us that's able to do things so that we can have some pleasure. And the skills that we worked so hard to develop when we were small and as we grew up: We really identify around those. But then, all of a sudden, this one goes and that one begins to deteriorate. How are you going to relate to that? Can you relate to that with good humor?

Can you take a good lesson about non-attachment and heed the lesson they tell you that if you want a happiness that's reliable, you have to find something that's not subject to change? For that, you have to look in pretty deep. Meditation allows you to do that as well, by working with the breath, by trying to gain a sense of whole-body awareness.

You're really refining your discernment, because this kind of concentration has to be just right. If things get too still in the mind, you blank out. If they're not still enough, you don't see things clearly. It's when you have the sense of just right that your discernment gets exercised, and you can start seeing deeper and deeper and deeper into the mind: levels of attachment that are very subtle but very tenacious. Things you never even noticed you had in your mind before now begin to become clear.

So we try to learn both from pleasure and from pain. They can be used to refine our understanding of what our minds are doing. We realize that even with the limitations that come to the body and to the mind, we can still do good with what we've got left.

The important point is that when you discover you've lost a particular skill or a particular ability, you don't get too worked up about it. Just notice, "Okay, what have I still got left?" It's as when your portfolio gets wiped out by a stock market crash. You look around and say, "What have I still got left?" Hopefully, you've got something that you've been investing in that doesn't have to go up and down with the stock market. You focus on that. And it's good to focus on that before things crash. This is what we're doing as we meditate. We're investing in the mind, investing in the quality of the mind's awareness in the present moment so that it can be our refuge when everything else begins to fail, to fall away. There's this still that we can hold onto. The deeper you go into it, the more solid it gets.