

Think Your Way to Stillness

May 16, 2016

Try to gather all your attention around the breath. Where do you feel it right now? If you're going to talk to yourself, talk to yourself about the breath. It's good training in how to think. We tend to think that meditation is a matter of not thinking at all. Many times we're tired of hearing ourselves chattering away inside. But the chatter doesn't end until it's done its work. You can't just say, "I don't like my thinking mind, I'm going to turn it off," and leave it at that. You have to train it how to think in a way where it can think itself into silence.

So how do you talk about the breath to get more quiet about the breath? Well, to begin with trying to get yourself out of the way as much as possible—particularly judgments about how good you are or how bad you are. This is one aspect of thinking that's not helpful at all in the meditation. You can talk about how well the breath is going, and how well it's not going, and that's a useful way of talking, because the breath is something you can change. But if you start getting down on yourself—that you're a bad person, or you're a bad meditator, or a bad practitioner, or whatever—what are you going to do? How are you going to change that? It's a dead-end kind of thinking. The same with thinking that you're really great: It's not a question of being great or bad, it's a question of working on a skill.

The skill here is getting the mind to be with the breath in a way that the breath energy is nourishing for the whole body, and can become nourishing for the whole mind. Because we're trying to develop a concentration that is centered but all-around. All the Buddha's images for right concentration talk about full body, full body, full body. There is that word "one-pointedness"—or in English it's one pointedness, but in Pali it's *ekaggatā*. But it doesn't necessarily mean one-pointed. *Eka-* is one; *agga* can mean the highest point of something, the highest part of something, but it can also mean gathering place. That seems to be the most useful translation in thinking about the mind as it settles down with the breath. Everything gathers right here. In this way you make the breath fill the body, so that the breath is your single preoccupation both in the sense that it's the one thing you're thinking about, and you can convince yourself that the whole body, the one sensation of having a body here, is all breath.

After all, it's through the breath that you sense the body to begin with. It's through the breath that you move the body around. It's your primary experience

of the body. But, all too often, we go way beyond the primary experience. We add a lot of extra interpretation that blocks out our sensation of the breath, or blocks out our awareness of the breath, our ability to see things in terms of the breath.

So there's the issue of: "How do you get the mind so it's aware of breath in different parts of the body?" You start out with the parts that are obvious. You breathe in, breathe out. Where do you feel it? That feeling is a type of breath. You may not be too conscious of the air coming in and out of the nose, but you can sense the rise and fall of the abdomen, or the rise and fall of the chest. Wherever there's a sense of movement that goes with the breath, focus there.

And you can talk to yourself about it. How does it feel? If you say, "I don't know," then just sit and watch it for a while. Ask yourself, "Could it feel more expansive? Could it feel more energizing? Could it feel healthier? Could it feel more calming? What do you need right now?" And if you say, "I don't know," then watch it for a while again. Experiment. Try different ways of breathing. Try to sensitize yourself to the energy flow in the body.

As you get to work with the parts that are more obvious, then gradually the subtler parts will become more apparent. The range of your awareness will grow. And you just keep with it as best you can. If you slip off, you drop whatever the thought is, and you're right back. You don't have to pull the mind back. Just drop the thought, and here you are. This is the natural place for you to be. And when you are here, ask yourself, "How can I maintain this? How do I maintain this sense of balance?" We are working on a skill here.

When I was in Brazil, someone was telling me they were reading a book about how any approach to meditation that approaches it as a skill, or as a gradual process, gets in the way of seeing the fact that there is no self—the idea being that if you're doing anything, there's going to be a self doing it. You have to convince yourself there's no self, so you don't do anything.

Well, the Buddha never said that that is what we're here for, to see that there's no self. We're here for freedom. We're here for release. You can't release the mind from its thinking unless you teach it how to think well. You can't release it from its sense of self until you've trained your sense of self to be more and more skillful. And a lot of that has to do with not focusing so much on the issue of self, but more focusing on the skill that you're working on here.

As the skill gets better, your sense of self gets more confident, and you begin to sort out all the different selves you've had: the ones you've been keeping in the back of the house. You ask, "Which ones do you want to keep feeding?" Some should be starved. But the ironic thing here is that your self gets healthier the less you focus on it, and the more you focus on doing the skill properly.

So train yourself to think about the breath in ways that are actually helpful, that make it more comfortable, make it easier for the mind to settle down here. As for other ways of thinking, you can let them go. You're not compelled to think them. Instead of forbidding yourself to think, just say you have your own permission not to think those things, not to get involved in a lot of the old stories that used to pull you down.

This is one of the reasons why we develop thoughts of goodwill at the beginning of the meditation. We try to think not only of our own happiness, but also the happiness of all beings. And then we start thinking about all beings: How do all beings live? They live in line with their karma. That's why we have the thoughts about equanimity there at the end, to remind ourselves that even though we would like to have everybody happy, it's still not going to happen just through our wish. It's not something we can do for everybody. But there is something we can do for ourselves. And we can be a good example to others.

But it's good to think about the larger world to help erase some of your too great concern with your own narratives and your own issues. You're sitting here in the middle of a large world of all beings; you've got the breath, and you've got the mind, and you've got your awareness working with the breath. Try to keep it in those terms. It's best thinking of the world as a whole. Then it's a lot easier to think of things with your own sense of self pushed to the background, and issues of your breath right now, the ability of the mind to stay settled with the breath right now, brought up to the fore. Think about them as much as you want, and that'll help you settle down.

Now, when the breath gets really good and really well-flowing throughout the body, then the need for the thinking gets less and less. And, again, it's not because you've forced it to stop. You just realize that it's not necessary and you can let it go, you can give it some freedom. Then you gain your freedom, too. You can be here with the breath, with the sensation of the breath, be one with the breath. Whatever perceptions that keep you here are very subtle. There may be a little thinking nibbling at the edges of your concentration, but don't pay it any attention.

You'll find that you've thought yourself to stillness. This is how it's done. Not by forbidding yourself to think, or just telling yourself that all thinking is bad; you have to learn how to think to the point where your thinking can see that it's not necessary anymore. You want to think in those terms and think with that purpose in mind. That's how you get past thinking: by learning how to think in a way that's really helpful. And the breath gives you a topic for learning how to do that well. It's right here, it's preverbal, and it's something you can work with—and

something you'll feel immediately when it's working well. When you can sensitize yourself to that, that's when you can see when the thinking is not necessary and just put it aside.