

Think of the Consequences

February 26, 2017

Take a couple of good, long, deep in-and-out breaths. Notice where you feel the process of breathing in the body. You don't have to focus just on the air coming in and out of the nose, because the air isn't doing anything. It's the body that's doing something. That's the wind element in the body: the energy that allows the air to come in, to go out. That's what you want to focus on. So notice where you feel that most prominently, most clearly. And allow your attention to settle there. It doesn't have to be one tiny point. In fact, eventually, the Buddha wants you to have a whole-body awareness.

So you could focus say, on the chest or on the abdomen, in the middle of the head, wherever the energy flow feels most prominent and also most comfortable, where it feels really satisfying to breathe. If you lose focus, come right back. If having a large area of focus is hard, you can go back to one spot. But it's good in the beginning to stay away from spots up in the head. Focusing there puts a lot of pressure on the nerves in the head. You want to be down in the body. Then, when you can stay with the breath and it's comfortable, allow your awareness to spread so that you feel like the whole body is breathing in, the whole body's breathing out. If the breath gets comfortable when the area of awareness is too small, you lose your focus on the body. You drift away. So keep the range of your awareness large.

The whole purpose of getting the mind into right concentration is to have a full-body awareness so that your awareness is stable: centered, but broad. The fact that it's centered means that you're still and can also watch things as they come and they go. And you don't have to come and go along with them. The fact that it's broad means you can catch things from different angles—things coming in and out of the mind that you might have missed if your focus were just on the one spot.

So, this centered but broad awareness is good for the body. It's good for the mind; healing for the body; healing for the mind. It allows you to see things in the mind you didn't see before. It's an act of kindness to be doing this for yourself. It's a way of showing goodwill for yourself. Goodwill is part of right resolve. It's also part of right concentration. The two go together.

Right resolve is the resolve not to cause harm or affliction. And there are different ways that we cause harm. One is through sensuality. Another is through ill will; another is through the intention of harmfulness. We want to avoid those

kinds of intentions. After all, the teachings of the Buddha are about putting an end to suffering and stress. When you realize that suffering and stress come from your actions, then you want to resolve to act in a way that doesn't cause any suffering, doesn't cause any stress.

That's how right view and right resolve are connected. Right resolve gives focus to right view. After all, right view is focused on the problem of suffering. The fact that the Buddha was focused on that problem and not on other problems is a sign of his goodwill. He saw that beings are suffering. He wanted to give them a teaching that would get them past that, to help them to escape from the suffering they were causing themselves. So right view and right resolve create an environment in the mind where it's easy to get into right concentration. All these factors of the path are an expression of goodwill.

You sometimes hear the idea that the mind naturally has goodwill and that the practice simply a matter of letting your feelings out in their natural way. But the Buddha never said that. He actually called goodwill a kind of restraint. In other words, you realize that there are good and bad intentions in the mind; good and bad voices in the mind. You have to learn how to tell which is which, and not go following the ones that would cause suffering.

That means you don't just go with what you're feeling. You have to think about the consequences of what your actions are. In this way, goodwill goes together with a quality the Buddha called *ottappa*, or compunction: realizing that if you're not skillful in what you do, you can cause some pretty bad harm. So you have to restrain yourself. You have to think about the consequences of your actions. You have to be willing to resist the impulse to just do what you feel like doing. If some voice in the mind says, "Do this," you don't just run with it. You have to ask yourself, "What are the consequences?"

Now, to keep the mind in a position where it's not looking for instant gratification all the time requires strength. That's why we have to do the right concentration, to give a strong sense of well-being so that we're not feeling so weak and hungry all the time. When the mind's hungry, it'll jump at anything. It can convince itself of anything at all: that this should be done or that should be said or this should be thought as a quick way of finding happiness.

As the Buddha said, the path requires some patience. You can't be lazy in the path, but at the same time, you can't be impatient. You have to take things step by step as they happen, as the mind is ready to develop. And that kind of patience requires that you have a sense of well-being that you can tap into inside. One of the uses of concentration is to provide that foundation of well-being so that the mind isn't so quick to jump at whatever it wants to do or feels like doing. It's

feeling well nourished, feeling strong inside, so then when the idea of doing or saying or thinking something comes up, you can ask yourself, “What would the long term consequences be?” And it won’t be too impatient. It’ll be willing to take the long term into account, because, after all, that’s what the principle of kamma is all about.

Actions are good or bad not because you like to do them or don’t like to do them. They’re skillful or unskillful because of the consequences—where they lead you. If you have genuine goodwill for yourself and for others, you have to think about the consequences. This means that getting the mind still in a position where it’s not so quick to jump after things is a gift to yourself and to other people around you. It’s the kind of restraint that really does express goodwill.

So allow the mind to have this sense of well-being inside. Don’t be too impatient to push on to what you think may be the next step, because whatever’s going to come up, the real insights that are good for the mind will sometimes be disappointing in the sense you see you’re stupid in ways you didn’t think you were stupid. You have to be willing to look at ways in which you’ve been dishonest with yourself—ways in which you’ve been lying to yourself, ways in which you’ve been careless, heedless—and not get knocked over by them. You need to have the strength inside to admit the truth of these things so that you can actually deal with them. Because, after all, that’s what ignorance is all about: The mind lies to itself.

Ajaan Chah once had an interesting statement. He said that watching the mind means trying to catch the mind lying to itself. It’s not just a matter of watching things come and go and being okay with their coming and going. You have to be able to see where the mind is lying, because that’s what the ignorance is. And the ability to see that and not get knocked over by it and not resist or deny it requires an inner strength, an inner sense of well-being. And that’s what the concentration is for.

So, however long it takes for the mind to get thoroughly settled, be willing to take that time. However long it takes for it to heal its sense of being frazzled by things outside, don’t be too quick to jump to what you think is the next stage in the practice. As the Buddha said, have some respect for concentration, respect for the fact that this may take time, but it’s worthwhile. And even if you find it easy to get the mind into concentration, you still have to stick with it for long periods of time so that the mind will develop the sense of stability, the sense of well-being inside where it doesn’t feel the need to jump after things.

So here we have an hour. That’s all you have to do for the hour: Get the mind in a sense of stillness and learn how to maintain it there and not jump after the

impulses that pop up and want to go someplace further. What's really further in the meditation is actually in the mind in concentration. If you stick with it, it matures.

It's like a fruit that you give the time to get all the sun and water it needs. One of the ajaans in Thailand said it's like having a mango. The mango in your tree is green. Suppose someone says, "Your mango's not ripe. What you want is a ripe mango. Then you can eat it. Ripe mangoes are yellow and they're soft. Your mango is green and hard." If you're foolish, you squeeze the mango and paint it yellow, but you don't get a ripe mango that way. You get a ripe mango by looking after the roots of the tree, watering it, giving it more sun, making sure the bugs don't get to it. And as you protect the mango tree, the mango fruit will mature and ripen. It's the same with the mind. You protect your concentration and it'll mature and ripen, becoming something you actually can rely on much better than using your preconceived notions to squeeze it in some direction or to paint it something else that it's not.

So, show some respect for your concentration. That's a way of showing goodwill for yourself as well.