

Here Be Tigers

September 2, 2018

There's a nice breeze outside. The temperature's not too hot: a good time and place to meditate. Of course, the time and the place really don't make that much of a difference. It's the mind that makes the difference. So make up your mind that you're going to stay with the breath, you're going to get the mind to settle down. And any thoughts that are not related to the breath right now, you're just not going to continue them. They may pop into the mind, but you don't have to draw them out or finish the thought. It might be like a half-finished object, but you just leave it half-finished. A half-sentence: Just leave it as a half-sentence. You don't have to make sense out of the thoughts. Let them be in the background. Let the breath be in the foreground.

Why the breath? Because the breath is the closest thing to the mind that you can focus on. We're here to understand our minds, but first we need something close to the mind to focus on, to gather all the thoughts and all the feelings and perceptions in the mind into one place. The breath is good because it's always there, and you don't have to create it. It's not like a meditation word that you have to repeat to yourself again and again. The breath is coming in, going out on its own. You just watch over it. And you begin to realize that you have some control over the breathing. You can stop it. You can make it longer. You can make it shorter. So take advantage of that fact.

Test the breath for a while to see what kind of breathing feels good now. You can think of different lengths, different qualities of the breath. You can think of it coming in and out of the body different spots in the body. Because the breath is not the air coming in and out through the nose. It's the energy flowing in the body—and outside, around the body. The breath outside: Let it come in and just meld with the breath inside, energize the breath inside, so that the line between the in-breath and the out-breath is very smooth.

You want to create a sense of feeling at ease here continually, so that the mind will be willing to relax some of its tension and settle down. Otherwise it's like a cat, jumping around from one uncertain thing to another uncertain thing. Even though it lands on something, it can't really relax into that thing, so it stays tense all the time, ready for the next jump. But when it's found something really solid, as when a cat is on the floor, it can totally stretch out, totally relax. In the same way, you want the mind to be totally at home with the breath, not so at home that you lose your alertness and your mindfulness, but at least get the mind relaxed so

that it doesn't have to be jumping all the time. Let it melt into the breath. Then keep it there.

You might say that if you stay here doing nothing, what insights are you going to get? Actually, the insights will come, but you can't determine them ahead of time. All too many people have read books on the Dhamma and say, "Well, these are the kinds of insights I'm supposed to get. I'm supposed to get insight into the three characteristics, insight into emptiness." Or whatever. But the first thing you've got to get insight into is the workings of your own mind, because some thoughts will want to pull you away from the breath, and you have to recognize: How do those thoughts form? These are the thoughts that rule our lives. Just because something comes into the mind, we think, "This is what I think, this is what I feel, this is what I should act on." But when you begin to see how arbitrary the process is, you can separate yourself out from the thoughts and not allow your life to be ruled so much by them. Or at the very least, you're in a better position to choose which ones to go with, which ones not to go with. If you can develop a sense of clear priorities and stick with it, you find that your thinking becomes a lot more useful.

Now, the top-priority question here is: What can you do minimize the amount of unnecessary suffering you're causing yourself? When the Buddha taught the four noble truths, he put this problem—the suffering caused by craving, suffering caused by the mind itself—as the top problem. This is the number-one priority. This is the problem that needs most attention. Once you've solved this problem, then nothing else is going to be a problem for the mind.

So make sure your priorities are straight. And then be very still and watch. What will happen is that you'll begin to see every now and then little thoughts forming in the mind, and they'll be forming right at the spot where the mind and the body meet at the breath. In fact, when something first forms, it's hard to say whether it's a thought or a physical sensation. The two go together. It's like two sides of a single coin. And it's up to you to decide which side you're going to choose. You can either regard it as a physical phenomenon or as a mental phenomenon. If you make it mental, of course, it has to have a meaning. The question is, what does the thought mean? What is this thought a thought about? And as you get quicker and quicker in seeing how the mind deals with these thoughts, you'll begin to see that you apply the meaning to that little stirring. The stirring didn't have a meaning on its own. So you have to ask yourself why: Why *that* meaning?

This is how you gain insight into the mind. These are the insights that are really useful. If you try to take insights that you've read about in books and plaster

them on the mind, it's just adding one more layer of plaster to obscure things. What you need to do is to strip all the plaster away. See, when the mind does something, where exactly does the unnecessary suffering get added? Why is it added? After all, who would want to cause suffering? And yet the suffering we cause ourselves is what weighs down the mind. There's something missing in there. There's a big area of ignorance, like those old maps where they used to have just the coastlines of North America and South America, and big white blank spaces in the middle that said, *Here be tigers* or, *Unknown*.

There are big blank spaces in the mind. There's the desire to find happiness and then there are actions that lead to suffering, lead to stress. How did you get from one to the other? This is what we can learn about the mind as we sit here very quietly.

So we're not just quiet. We try to make the mind very, very still, but we pose some questions in the mind, questions like: What are you doing? Why are you doing it? And is there an alternative, a way of thinking and a way of going through the world that does not add unnecessary suffering? Those are the big questions the Buddha has you ask, because otherwise, if you can't solve this problem inside, then everything else in the world is going to be a problem. They just get added on top of the problems you're already creating.

Years back we were sitting right here. A woman brought a friend to join the meditation. The friend had never meditated before. We gave her meditation instructions. And it was a day like this: a nice breeze off the west. Not too hot. Everything was very quiet. And at the end of the hour, she opened her eyes and said, "I have never suffered so much in my life." All the suffering came from within. It was all the chatter going on in her mind. And it wasn't just her. We're all that way. We find ways of making ourselves suffer even in the best situations. But if our minds are trained, it's just the opposite. We can be in really bad situations and yet not suffer from them—if we learn to understand the workings of the mind.

So here we are. We've got a nice comfortable afternoon. Make the most of it to look into your own mind. You have no other responsibilities right now. No other places you have to go. Nothing else you have to think about. Just try to learn about the workings of your own mind. And this big mystery inside, this big blank space inside, will begin to get filled in. And you find that when the details get filled in, then you no longer have to start with a desire for happiness and end up with suffering. You find that your desire for happiness can lead to happiness.

That's what's good about the Buddha's teachings. He's not teaching some interesting theory or exotic idea. The teachings are there for happiness. He focuses

on the problem of suffering because that's what's getting in the way of our happiness. But once that problem is solved, then there's nothing to get in the way.