

Mind in & of Itself

September 3, 2018

As you start to focus on the breath, it's good to make a survey of three things. First, the breath itself. Take some good long deep in-and-out breaths, and think of the whole body breathing. Not just the lungs, not just the nose, the whole nervous system is involved in the breathing process. If there's any area in the body where the breath is not flowing smoothly, see if you can relax it to allow the breath to flow.

That connects with the second thing to survey, which is the feelings in the body. Can you find a sense of ease someplace in the body, related to the breath? If you can, try to maintain it. Make sure that when you breathe in and breathe out you don't squeeze that spot or make it tense. You don't have to put a little squeeze at the end of the in-breath or at the end of the out-breath to mark the switch between the two breaths. Let them flow into each other. Because after all, it is breath flowing into breath. There's no clear boundary line.

And then third, make a survey of your mind. Is the mind ready to settle down? Sometimes this is the big problem. The breath is okay, the feelings in the body are okay, they might not be perfect everywhere but at least you can find something that feels good. But the mind is carrying lots of attitudes, lots of problems from the day, and you've got to work on it.

In other words, what you're doing is surveying the first three of the frames of reference under Right Mindfulness—body, feelings, and mind. And if the mind is the problem, you have to work on the mind "in and of itself." What does that mean, "in and of itself"? It means that you look at your ideas not in terms of their content, not whether they're right or wrong. You can think about all the injustices that have been served out to you in the course of the day, or over the past year or so, and it's right, but it's making you suffer right now.

Which means it's not the right time for that. You look at these things in terms of where these thoughts are coming from and what they're doing to the mind. Are they coming from skillful motives, or are they coming from unskillful ones? Are they leading the mind in skillful directions or unskillful ones?

This is looking at the mind "in and of itself." Where do the thoughts come from? What do they do to the mind? You're looking at them as part of a causal process. They may be perfectly right, but if their rightness is making you suffer right now, you've got to get past them.

This is when you start using whatever techniques the Buddha advises, such as goodwill to counteract ill-will. Contemplation of death to counteract laziness—in other words, realizing that you don't know how much time you've got, so you can't let yourself be lazy, you've got to work now. Because now is all you've got for sure. The future is not sure at all.

Contemplate the body to counteract thoughts of lust. Contemplate goodwill to counteract thoughts of anger. In other words, you do what you can to keep these thoughts in check and to encourage ones that are more conducive to getting the mind to settle down. For instance, if you're thinking thoughts of goodwill, first it's goodwill for yourself. Ask yourself: If you really had goodwill for yourself, would you let yourself spend a whole hour thinking about thoughts of revenge or thoughts of discontent? Thinking of goodwill in this way brings you back to the breath.

The same with contemplation of the body: The Buddha doesn't say that the body is totally bad, simply that if you use it as an object of lust, you're misusing it. There are better uses for the body, like focusing on the breath. In particular, if you want to understand the reasons why the mind can make the body look attractive one moment and unattractive in another, and go for the unattractive or go for the attractive, you need to develop more mindfulness, more alertness. And where do you do that? You go back to the breath.

In other words, you use your thinking to bring you around to the breath, and to counteract whatever thoughts, or other attitudes in the mind that would get in the way.

Looking at your thoughts in this way is called *looking at the mind in and of itself*. To see when it needs to be *steadied*. To see when it needs to be *gladdened*, given energy. And when it needs to be *released* from thoughts that are weighing it down. This comes under several factors of the right path.

You might remember that passage where the Buddha talks about how he got on the path to begin with, when he divided his thoughts into two sorts: the skillful ones on one side, the unskillful ones on the other. And he defined these two categories in terms of right resolve, looking at them in terms of where they came from, where they led. That's looking at them in terms of right mindfulness. Making the effort to curb the ones that are unskillful, that's right effort, to encourage the ones that were skillful, that's right effort, and above all: realizing that if the mind is suffering, even though there may be bad things happening outside, the suffering is coming from within—you can't keep blaming other people for your suffering. That's right view.

Right view tells you that if you want to look at the reasons for your suffering, you have to look inside and you have to step out of the thought worlds that would pull you outside. And you have to keep this perspective in mind at all times, watching the thoughts simply as events coming and going in the mind, to see that they're coming from a state of mind, and they're going someplace. They're going to lead to actions. If you don't watch out, they're going to lead you to do things that are unskillful, to say things that are unskillful, to think up more things that are unskillful. This perspective comes under right view.

You may remember the passage where the Buddha said that for each of the factors of the path there are three factors that circle around it: right view, right effort, and right mindfulness. So here you're trying to get the mind in shape. That's part of your right resolve, but that right resolve is informed by right view. Right effort is what carries out the resolve. Right mindfulness is what gives you the appropriate frame of reference to look at these thoughts as events coming and going, without getting all tied up in whether they're right or not. Simply see them as part of a process that's going on in the mind and that's creating suffering.

When you take this perspective, it helps you step back from your thoughts and realize that they're not really worth going with. Even otherwise skillful thoughts that would take you away from the breath are not what you need right now. They may be true and even beneficial, but this is not the time and place for them. What you need right now is to get back to the breath to develop qualities like more mindfulness, more alertness, more ardency. There's a lot of work that needs to be done in the mind.

You sit here, and there's nothing to bother you. The temperature outside is almost perfect, it's quiet, and yet the mind can still create suffering for itself. It's got this potential inside. As long as it's got that potential, there's work to be done—and you bring it to the breath to do that work. This way, once you've surveyed the body, and the feelings, and the mind, you can bring them together: breathing in a way through the body that allows pleasure to fill the body, so that it feels good to have your awareness fill the body. In this way, all three things are here together, filling the same space.

That's how right resolve leads to right concentration: the concentration that allows you to do this work with more precision, in more places where you hadn't been able to do it before, so that you can bring the path into your life, so that your life *becomes* the path. That's when it gets results.