

Contemplating the World You Create

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We focus the mind first at the breath because as you get to know the breath, you begin to realize that the mind opens itself up there, right at its attention to the breath. And that's what we're trying to understand.

Our primary task here is not trying to understand the world outside. It's trying to understand the worlds of our own experience, how we create them—and how we tend to do a pretty sloppy job. This is why we suffer, and then that suffering spills out onto other people. As you learn how to understand your mind, you do begin to understand more about the world outside, but that's secondary. The big problem is that each of us is creating suffering, creating stress, and then we try to live in it, and we find that it's not a good place to live.

Sometimes we do our best to tell ourselves that it's okay. But it's not okay. As the Buddha said, the secret to his awakening was discontent even with skillful qualities, to say nothing of unskillful ones. It's that sense of discontent that drives the practice. So we get the mind to settle down because we realize that we don't really understand it well and we're not content with our lack of understanding. We want to figure things out.

But to figure out the mind, on the one hand you can read a lot about the descriptions of mental processes, and that's a level of right view. But if you really want to understand things, you have to watch them as they're happening. And as you're taking a more proactive role in shaping concentration, you discover that you already are taking a proactive role in your life, much more than you might have thought. The simple fact that you're aware of the contact at the six senses comes after a lot of other factors going on in the mind, factors that shape what you see, what you notice, what you want to get out of the six senses. But to see those factors, you have to play around with them.

It's like conducting a scientific experiment. The scientists don't just simply sit there and watch a rabbit, say. They do things to the rabbit. They put it in a box and lower the temperature and then measure the oxygen and other things in the box to see what its respiration does as you lower the temperature. Then they raise the temperature and measure the results. In other words, they poke it: They change the conditions to see which conditions have an impact on some things, and which conditions have impacts on other things, and which conditions don't seem to have much impact at all. You can separate these things out by manipulating things.

In the same way, you're trying to manipulate the mind, trying to get it into a state of concentration. And all the things that the mind does to shape its experience have to enter into the concentration. For instance, you need to have a perception of the breath and to figure out which perceptions are most skillful, which ones are the most helpful in getting the mind to settle down.

One of the reasons we talk about the breath energy in the body is because you're trying to get the mind in a state of concentration where a sense of ease can fill the body, even a sense of rapture can fill the body. If you think of the body as one big solid lump, it's hard for the rapture to get into that lump. But if you think of your experience of the body as being primarily energy, then the in-breath energy can flow easily into the body breath-energy, and then the ease and the rapture can flow along with the energy when they start developing. So you've got a perception of the breath that helps with that.

Then you need to have thoughts about what you're doing, where you want to focus the mind, how you want to breathe, and how to breathe in a way that does give rise to a sense of well-being. These are things you have to think about, but it's not thinking in the abstract. You're thinking and then you're trying to *apply* your thoughts to see if they work, to see if they don't work. In that way, it's like the theoretical part of science where you can have all kinds of theories but then they have to be tested. And only when they're tested and they meet the test can you accept them. In the same way, you may have different ideas about how to get the mind to settle down and you try them out.

Then if you find that the breath doesn't work for you right away, there are all kinds of alternative things you can do to get the mind to calm down, to put it in a position where it then is ready to return to the breath. You can think about the sublime attitudes: goodwill for everybody, compassion for everybody, empathetic joy for everybody, equanimity for the entire universe.

You can think about the things out there in the world that you've laid claim to and tell yourself, "That's really not mine. Even my body isn't really mine." You've borrowed it for a bit. As you eat, you're taking in elements from the world outside and putting them inside your body. Then the elements of the body wear away, so you keep replacing them, replacing them, replacing them. Every seven years, apparently, every cell in your body has been totally changed. Some cells get changed more quickly. And so which parts of the body there can you say are really yours? They're yours for a while and then they go. Even the lenses of your eyes, which apparently stay there for a long time, eventually have to be let go. When you think about that, it helps give you a sense of detachment from the concerns outside. When even your body is something you can't lay claim to, how can you

lay claim to things outside? That puts you in a position where it's easy to settle back down and just be right here. Then you've got the breath right here.

So you've got feelings and perceptions and all kinds of thought-constructs, intentions, and acts of attention: They're all right here. And as you try to get the mind into concentration, you begin to get a sense of which ones are involved and how they get involved. That's how you begin to see the processes of the mind. That's when you can begin to see how they can cause stress and suffering when you're not doing them in a skillful way. Anything that pulls you away from a sense of ease, pulls you away from a sense of peace in the present moment, you have to question it: "Why would I want to go there? What am I looking for? What's pushing me out?" And when you start contemplating the processes of the mind in this way, you see that the processes are what's causing the trouble.

It's not so much the world that's causing the trouble, it's the way you relate to contact from the world, that's the problem—and that's something you can actually change right here. The world outside is really hard to change. A lot of decisions are being made out there by people over whom we have no control whatsoever. You look at them and you begin to think, "Is the human race ever going to make intelligent decisions?" There are so many choices available, and yet people are making so many wrong decisions, and there are so many people whom you cannot influence.

But you *can* have an influence starting in here, so that the way you create the world of your experience doesn't have to cause suffering. It may seem like a small thing when compared to the world outside, but it's what you can do. And do it so that you have a good influence on other people. The more you get to know the processes of your own mind, the more you can give people advice on how they can get to know theirs. Because the real cause for everybody's suffering is inside them. There's no way you can get inside them to straighten things out, but you *can* set a good example.

After all, we have the example of the Buddha. That's made a huge impact on the world, showing people that it is possible to get out. And we are *getting out*. We're not just deciding that we're going to stay here and be in the present moment and accept that as our goal. The goal is to get out. This is a place where we can't live.

One of the Buddha's common images is of a house on fire. Everything in the present is on fire, being destroyed. All these fabrications that we're creating can't be a place to stay. Because as soon as we do them—and they are things that we *do*—as soon as we do them, they're not going to just stay there. They ignite and disappear. You have to keep doing them again and again and again. You did it

yesterday and today you have to do it again and tomorrow you have to do it again. One moment to moment to moment, you have to keep at it. Even with the concentration you have to keep doing it. You can't just settle in and say, "Okay, I'll relax." It's relatively restful compared to everything else, and because it's restful it is a place where you can see things clearly and be more sensitive to what's going on, but even *it* is burning. So we're not trying to find satisfaction in being in a burning house. We've got to get out.

And the Buddha does give us a better place to live—it is possible—outside of the present moment entirely. So the closer we get to that, the better example we set for others. And that's how we all have impact in the world: through the examples we set.

So at the very least, make sure you set a good example by solving your own problem. That's why we're focused right here, because this is where the problem gets solved.