

It's All in What You're Doing

January 20, 2020

We've come to train our minds. So why are we looking at our breaths? It's because we need to focus the mind. We need to bring it into the present moment. The breath is the guarantee that we're right here. There's no future breath you can watch, no past breath you can watch. So, at the very least, you've got some part of your mind focused in the present. As you get more and more familiar with staying with the breath, you can get to observe the mind in action. How does it keep itself with the breath? How does it motivate itself? What is it reminding itself of? These are the activities we have to look into. There are qualities of the mind that lie behind these activities. Those are the things we want to focus on.

When the Buddha set out his major teachings toward the end of his life—when he called the monks together and said, “These are the teaching that I want to make sure you're all in agreement about”—he set out the seven sets that form the wings to awakening. They're qualities. No mention of the five aggregates, no mention of the six sense spheres, dependent co-arising. They talk about mindfulness, analysis of qualities, persistence, rapture, concentration, serenity, equanimity. That was in one of the sets. All the sets are sets of qualities. So you want to look into the qualities that are motivating you here, and that you're applying to the breath.

In terms of your motivation, the number one motivation, the Buddha said, is heedfulness. You're reminding yourself that there are dangers and you develop the right view that guides heedfulness, saying, on the one hand, that the real dangers are inside but they can be overcome. If they couldn't be overcome, there would be no need to be heedful. We'd just have to accept them as they came. Right view also reminds you that you are shaping the present moment, so you want to look into that—how you're shaping it. You want to keep this in mind. This is what mindfulness does. It keeps reminding you of the things that you should be keeping in mind to apply as you're trying to shape the present moment skillfully.

So you want to reflect on your heedfulness, reflect on your mindfulness. Are they pointing you in the right direction? You might be heedful of dangers outside: problems with the environment, problems of the politics of our country, problems with the economy. Those loom pretty large, but the Buddha says No: The real danger is inside.

The same principle applies to the things you're remembering right now. When I first started out practicing, I had lots of voices inside the mind that were saying, “Don't do this, there are other things that you need to be doing.” So I had to sort through them. What was I keeping in mind? Whose voice was I remembering?

This is when I began to realize that the mind was a committee. Lots of different people in there. My mother was in there. My father was in there. Teachers and school friends from my past. TV, radio, magazines, books. All sloshing around in there. They all seemed very authoritative and they were all telling me not to do what I was doing. But then there were other voices that said, “Yes, this is what you should be doing.”

This is where the concept of refuge comes in. Who are the people you remember? The word for refuge in Pali—*sarana*—means both refuge and something you keep in mind. In this case, I was keeping in mind what I was learning from Ajaan Lee, what I was learning from Ajaan Fuang. I had to weigh in the balance who seemed to know more of what they were talking about. So I gave some respect to their voices even though they were going against a lot of ingrained habits I had picked up from my past. I realized what I had picked up was pretty accidental, things just lying around. If I really wanted to get someplace in the meditation, I had to decide that some voices had to be put aside and other voices would have to be remembered. That’s what mindfulness is: It’s remembering. And you try to remember the right thing.

As the Buddha defines it, mindfulness means keeping in mind what was done and said a long time ago. That can mean a lot of things: what other people have done and said; what you, yourself, have done and said. For instance, when you’re sitting here and it gets painful, you can think of the example of the ajaans who sat for long hours. It wasn’t because their bodies were made out of steel that they were able to do that. They had to deal with pain, too. But they learned how to train their minds not just to bear with the pain, but to be with the pain and not suffer from it. Their example shows it can be done.

There’s a case in the Canon where a monk is out in the wilderness. It’s a big grassy wilderness, not the beautiful forest wilderness we like to think about. He’s sick. And he’s tempted: Is he going to leave the wilderness to try to find a doctor? But then he thinks of the example of the great monks of the past—the great meditators of the past. They were able to cure their illnesses through developing the five strengths, the five faculties, the seven factors for awakening. So he keeps in mind their example. He says, “Even if they didn’t cure their illnesses, at least they were able to cure their minds from the suffering of the illness.”

That’s what right mindfulness means: keeping in mind good examples. As for your own actions, what you’ve learned from your own actions, keep that in mind as well. In the past, you’ve learned how to focus on the breath in ways that worked and in ways that didn’t work. Well, you remember that.

So as you’re sitting here and not getting anywhere in the meditation, you can stop to ask, “What did I do in the past in a similar situation?” Think about it. Try to remember what you did. This is why one of the steps of leaving meditation, right before you sense that it’s time for the session to be over, is to ask yourself: What went well during the meditation. At what point was the mind centered? At what point was the mind at ease? Where was it focused? How were

you breathing? What had you been doing up to that point? You try to remember those things so that you can try to recreate those conditions the next time around.

Now, it may happen the next time around that the body is in a different state, the mind is in a different state, and things don't work quite the same way. Well, experiment until you find what works in that state. This all becomes part of your repertoire, part of your fund of useful memories. If you find that you're having trouble settling down now, you can also ask yourself, "What useless things am I remembering right now?" Sort that out. Not all mindfulness is right mindfulness. There is such a thing as wrong mindfulness.

So as you're getting the mind to settle down, learn to reflect on what you're doing. If you find that way of reflecting destroys your concentration, it's a sign you're not quite ready for that yet. Go back to the concentration. Give your full attention to the breath. But as things are getting more solid inside, you can reflect, and it's in reflecting on what you're doing that you can learn some important lessons.

When you hear about the Buddha saying that insight comes from contemplating the five aggregates or contemplating the six sense media, where are you going to find them? You're going to find them in what the mind is doing right now. When the mind is concentrated, you've got the five aggregates right there in action. You've got the breath, which is form. You've got the feeling of ease that you're creating by the way you pay attention to the breath. You've got the perception that's holding you with the breath. You've got the thought fabrications that are directing your thoughts and evaluating to get the breath and the mind to settle down together. And then you've got the awareness, the consciousness, that's aware of all these things. That's where you're going to see those five aggregates. It's not that they're going to be set out some place separate from you, separate from what you're doing. They're going to be *in* what you're doing. The same with the six sense spheres. Even dependent co-arising is in what you're doing. That's where you're going to see it. So you don't have to look anywhere else.

And it's important that you not have the idea that bare awareness is going to be right here and that you're going to see these things separate from your bare awareness. Because even in bare awareness, there's a lot of perception, there's a lot of mindfulness, remembering to stay with just what's coming up right in the present moment. You begin to realize that what seems to be bare awareness is not really bare at all. There's a lot going on. If you try to deny what's going on, you've shut off the opportunities for gaining insight. It's in reflecting on what you're doing that all the various topics of insight come up.

So it's in the qualities that you're bringing to this practice here in getting the mind to settle down: That's where you're going to see those wings to awakening. And in those wings to awakening, you're going to see things like the aggregates and the sense spheres.

So it's all right here. It's simply a matter of learning how to be properly reflective about what you're doing and watching what you're doing: That's when things open up. This is why it's so important to realize that the present moment is not something that's been given to you by

your past actions and that you're simply on the receiving end. You're shaping it as you're experiencing it, so you want to get a sense of what you're doing right now. Without what you're doing right now, there would be no present moment. Your present actions are that important.

So get the mind here. Get it really still. Then reflect on how you got it still and how you're keeping it still. It's in that reflection that, one, you can get into deeper levels of concentration by abandoning things that are unnecessary. And two, this is how you gain insight, the kind of insight that can free the mind.

So do this well. And as you get more skilled at it, reflect on what you're doing, because everything you need to know is involved in what you're doing right here.