

## *Why Now*

*March 14, 2020*

Okay, close your eyes and watch your breath. Take a couple of good, long, deep in-and-out breaths, and notice where you feel the process of breathing in the body. Place your attention there, and try to keep it there so you can observe: Does long breathing feel good? If it doesn't feel good, you can change. You can try shorter breathing, deeper, more shallow, heavier, lighter, faster, slower.

Experiment to see what kind of breathing feels best right now. You can either try specific kinds of breathing, or you can simply pose the question in the mind, "What kind of breathing would feel good now?" And see how the body responds. The more continuous your awareness, the more continuously you are here in the present moment, then the more sensitive you'll be to what feels good.

When you find a rhythm of breathing that feels good, stick with it. If after a while, it doesn't feel good, you can change again. But to notice this, you have to stay right here. We use the breath as an anchor to keep ourselves in the present moment. The mind tends to wander so much into the past or the future. And if you find that it is wandering, just drop whatever the thought is, no matter how important it may seem, or how interesting, or how entertaining. Remind yourself: That's not what you need right now.

You're trying to develop a skill, the skill of being mindful and alert in the present moment. Why do you want to be here? You have two reasons. One is that there's work to be done in the present moment. Our lives are shaped by our actions. Our actions are shaped by our intentions—by the choices we make. And where and when do we make the choices? We make them right here, right now. So you want to be attentive and alert right here, right now, to make sure that you're making the right choices.

And the second reason is that we don't know how much more time we have to develop these skills. Our time together is limited. The time of our lives, as they say, has no sign to say  $x$  number of years,  $x$  number of months or days remaining. And the fact that you're young doesn't mean that you have more time left than older people do. It's all very uncertain. But you *do* know that you have right here, right now, so you want to take advantage of this opportunity right here, right now to develop as many good qualities in the mind as you can.

All the aspects of the practice are developed in the present moment. There's generosity. When you see an opportunity to be generous, act on it. There's a tradition in Thailand that people like to do something especially good on their

birthdays: making a gift to a monastery or to a cause that they like. Ajaan Fuang, my teacher, always used to say, “Why wait until your birthday to do good? Your death day may come before your birthday. If there’s the intention to be generous, act on it there and then.”

The same with the precepts: We know that killing is harmful. Stealing is harmful. Illicit sex, lying, taking intoxicants: All these things are harmful. If you know that something is harmful, why keep on doing it? You’ve got the choice to say, “I’m going to stop. Now.” This is what taking the precepts is all about. You make the intention that you’re going to give up these harmful activities. You make the intention, and you act on it right now.

The same with the meditation—especially with the meditation: It does involve remembering things from the past and anticipating the results you’re going to get in the future, but the work you do is right here, right now. You’re mindful as to what needs to be done and alert as to whether you’re actually doing it. Like right now, trying to stay with the breath: Are you really with the breath? Are you really sensitive to the breath? In other words, are you ardent in your practice?

These are the three qualities that the Buddha said go into mindfulness. And then, from mindfulness they lead the mind into concentration. You’re *mindful*, i.e., you keep something in mind. In this case, you keep in mind the fact that you’re trying to stay with the breath. You’re *alert* to what the breath is doing, and you’re alert to whether the mind is with the breath comfortably or not. And then you’re *ardent* in trying to do this well.

These three qualities that go into the practice of meditation are based on the practice of generosity and virtue. With generosity, you’re mindful of the needs of others. You’re alert to an opportunity to help. And you make the effort. With virtue, you’ve got to keep the precept in mind. You’re alert to whether your behavior is in line with the precepts. And if it’s not, what do you have to change? You make the effort.

With meditation, you’re mindful as to where you want to stay. You keep in mind what you’ve learned from your meditations in the past as to what works and what doesn’t work, what you have to watch out for, and what are the signs that you’re doing it well. These are the things you keep in mind. You’re alert to what the breath is doing. You’re alert to what the mind is doing. And you’re ardent in trying to do it well.

It’s in this way the mind begins to settle down. You put aside your other concerns. You try to be with the breath in and of itself. What this means is that you focus on the sensation of breathing as you directly experience it. As for other concerns of the world outside, you put them aside. Whether they’re going to be

good or bad, you don't have to take them up right now. We carry the world around with us so much, both in our minds and in the screens that we carry with us to keep us connected with the world all the time, so right now, it's good to be able to put the screens away.

Put your concerns of the world away. Focus directly on the needs of the mind because your mind is your most important possession. If the mind is in good shape, then you can be in horrible situations and not suffer. If the mind is in bad shape, you can be in the best situations outside and still create a lot of suffering for yourself and the people around you. So the shape of your mind, the state of your mind should be your top priority—your primary concern.

This is one of the reasons we try to breathe comfortably. You're giving the mind a good place to stay in the present moment. The mind likes pleasure. Ajaan Fuang used to say if you want to catch hold of the mind, you've got to give it something it likes. He gave an analogy; it's not a pretty analogy, but it's memorable. He said if you want to catch eels and you try to just jump down into the river and catch hold of the eels, they slip out of your hands every which way. But you find something that eels like. He said they like dead dogs. So you put a dead dog in a clay jar, put it down in the mud, and the eels will go into the jar of their own accord.

The same with the mind: You give it pleasant breathing, and it'll be more and more willing to want to stay in the present moment to experience that pleasure, to allow that pleasure to fill the body. When the mind gains pleasure like this, it's a harmless pleasure. It's a pleasure based on mindfulness and alertness, so it doesn't fog or cloud the mind.

If the mind has a sense of well-being like this, then it can stay in the present moment and watch itself. In other words, it can watch what other activities come up and it can be a lot more objective about which are worth following and which are not; which are skillful, which are not; which ones will lead to long-term well-being and which will lead to long-term suffering. As the mind settles in, it can see itself a lot more clearly and become a lot more discerning about where it's causing itself unnecessary suffering. And whatever the activity is that's causing that suffering, it's in a better position to let it go.

So this is some of the work we do right now. We put the mind in good shape not only so that it can rest in the meditation, but also so that it has a good home to stay in as it goes through the day. As you work with the breath, you don't have to be sitting here with your eyes closed. Wherever you are, you can ask yourself, "How am I breathing right now? How's the breath energy in the body? Is it in good shape?" Breathe a couple of times, and you can put it in good shape.

You'll be amazed at the effect that it has on the mind. It calms you down and clears the air. So you're in a better position to see what's skillful and what's not. You have the strength to act on that knowledge, and the sense of well-being allows you to abandon some of your hungers.

This is one of the big problems in life. We're hungry for pleasure. And if the mind doesn't get pleasure in the right way, it'll look for pleasure in the wrong way.

When you're hungry, almost everything looks like good food. But when you're well fed—this is what feeding the mind with good pleasure does—you're strong and you have a good, comfortable place to stay. Then you can see more clearly what's good food and what's not good food for the mind. You can nourish the mind with nothing but good food all the time. You'll benefit. The people around you will benefit.

And wherever you are, wherever the present moment is, you can do your work with ease. It's good work. When the mind has a good, solid foundation, it can do its work well, both for your own benefit and for the benefit of everyone around you.