

Your Territory

October 18, 2020

It's been a busy day. Time to clear the busyness away and give the mind some space of its own.

Make a survey of your body. That's going to be your territory right now: from the top of the head down to the soles of the feet and the tips of the toes. Don't let yourself go outside of this territory, the body in and of itself.

Sometimes we're told that mindfulness is a wide-open awareness with no boundaries. But it does have its boundaries. It's wide, it fills the whole body, but certain parts of the territory of your awareness are off-limits. The Buddha said that thoughts of sensuality right now are off-limits. This connects with the fact that we're trying to get the mind into concentration, and that's one of the first things you've got to put aside to get rightly concentrated: thoughts of sensuality. You want to be secluded from them.

The same applies to right mindfulness. When teaching right mindfulness, the Buddha gave the example monkeys. They live in the Himalayas, and there are some areas of the Himalayas where human beings don't go but monkeys go; other areas where human beings go but monkeys don't go. The dangerous ones are the ones where monkeys go and human beings go, because that's where the human beings set out traps. Any monkey that wanders into that territory is in danger. And that territory, the Buddha said, stands for sensuality, your thoughts of the different sensual pleasures you'd like to have.

Just put those aside for the time being as you're mindful of the breath in and of itself. You're going to find your pleasure with the breath. Be with the breath coming in; be with the breath going out. Experiment for a while to see what rhythm feels good. When you've found something that seems to feel good, stick with it until it doesn't feel so good anymore. You can change. But you want to fully inhabit this territory. And for the time being, don't recognize anything outside of this.

The mind plays games with itself, and the main game is called perception: We place labels on things: *This* means *that*, and *that* means *this*; *this* is a sign for *that* and *that* is a sign for *this*. The Thais have a good insight into the word perception as they've adopted the word *sañña* from Pali. In Thai it came to mean not only perception in the way we think of it in English, but also agreement or contract. And that's a lot of what perception is in the mind: You have an agreement that *this* means *that*, *that* means *this*, and once you've made those agreements, the mind can go surfing through all kinds of territories. X means y, y means z, z means a, a means b. It goes around and around and around, through all kinds of associations.

You want to disassociate the mind from those things. So for the time being, anything that comes in and says *this* means *that*, you just say, "I don't recognize that." Refuse to go along.

There's just one perception you want to hold on to right now, and that's the perception of the breath. If perceptions are going to play games with you, well, you can play games with them. Tell yourself you're going to stay right here with this sensation of the body in and of itself.

Stay with the in-and-of-itself, because the body's very much like a computer keyboard. You type the regular keys and an A is an A and a B is a B and so on down through the alphabet. But then you push the Control button and things change: A is All, B is Bold, C is Copy, D is Font (for some reason). In other words, the perception that the computer has been programmed to recognize and play along with—that says *this* means *that* and *that* means *this*—gives a new meaning to those keys. In the same way, with the sensations of the body, once you apply the perception that *this* sensation means *that*, and *that* sensation means *this*, you're off someplace else. It's one of the ways in which we modulate from being focused on the breath into other states of becoming and we go traveling around.

But here you don't want to travel. You want to settle in. Because states of becoming are places you can't really stay. You travel for a while and then they run out. Either they simply disintegrate or they turn on you. Something that seemed nice to begin with turns into something not so nice. So go back to your home territory, the place where human beings can't go, where there's just your awareness, and allow the mind to settle down.

We're so used to having to jump from one sensation to another, or one thought to another, that as soon as we land on something, we're already tensed up, ready to jump again. But here there's no need to tense up. There's nowhere else you have to go right now. As long as you're alive, the breath will be here, the sensation of the body will be here, so there's no need to go anywhere else. The only thing that would pull you away is if you allow uncomfortable breath sensations to stay very long.

Now, in some cases there will be parts of the body that you can't change with the breath, but you work on the ones that you can. The rhythm of breathing, the depth of the breathing, the texture of the breathing will influence how you experience different parts of the body. So try to find the parts that are especially sensitive to the in-and-out breath. Try to protect them so that they feel wide-open as you breathe in, wide-open as you breathe out. And protect that sensation.

What happens is that other thoughts will come in, and things tend to tense up right there. Well, you don't want that. Your way of preventing them is to make sure that this stays wide-open. They'll complain, but you've got to appreciate the value of this state of mind, the ability to settle in. It gives you a place to rest, that's for sure. It gives you strength. It also gets you out of your ordinary thought-worlds. And the practice you get in learning how to not recognize the perceptions that would pull you into thought-worlds helps give you some distance from them. When you have distance, that's when you can see them more clearly.

As the Buddha said, discernment comes from seeing things as something separate: The thought is separate from your awareness; sensations of the body are separate from your

awareness. But for the time being, you want those sensations of the body and the awareness to meld together, so that you can counteract any tendency to want to go into the thoughts—because the thoughts tend to be your normal place of traveling around.

So for the time being, at least, think of the awareness in the body as being one. It's not that you're in one part of the body watching the breath in another part of the body. You're fully in the body, and the breath is all around and all through you. Hold that perception in mind.

Take this as a challenge: How long can you stay here? You're working on a skill. Now, the mind can think about anything it wants to at any time. But having time to work on this skill, that's a real privilege. So here's the time. Make the most of it. You'll come away refreshed and with a new perspective on things. The combination of the two will enable you to pull yourself out of a lot of unskillful thinking.

We go for unskillful thinking, one, because it gives us some pleasure; and two, because it falls in line with our values. But when you find that you can gain a free pleasure simply by the way you breathe and settle in with the body, it makes the pleasure that comes from unskillful thinking not quite so attractive. You come to see the value of not jumping into any thought that comes through, not believing everything you think. That allows your discernment to develop.

Sometimes you hear that calm and insight are two separate things. They are different, but they go together. The calm and the tranquility allow you to settle in. The insight comes when you can see things consistently, and you're not going to see anything consistently without the calm. And you have to gain some understanding of the mind's workings for the calm to come. So work on these two qualities of calm and insight together.

For the time being, make everything into one. That way, the different parts of the mind that tend to be scattered around in little bits and pieces, and are weakened because they're scattered and piecemeal, will be able to come together and give one another strength.