

Rightly Directed

July 4, 2021

Set your mind on the breath right now, and keep it right here. Try to make the breath steady, coming in steadily, going out steadily. And remind yourself that as you set the mind here, you're both setting it in the right place and pointing it in the right direction.

The Buddha calls this *atta samma-panidhi*, the self rightly directed. As the Buddha said, when we meditate, when we get the mind in concentration, it serves at least three purposes. One is for a comfortable abiding in the present moment. Two is for developing more mindfulness and alertness, and three is for getting rid of the defilements in the mind. We're doing this both for the sake of our well-being here in the present moment, and for our well-being in the future.

In the present moment, you try to be with a breath that's calming, soothing, solid: It comes in steadily, goes out steadily—and your awareness follows the breath. Make that steady, too. Even between the in-breath and the out-breath, and between the out-breath and the in-breath, try to stay steadily there. Try to keep your mindfulness and alertness going continually without any gaps.

As for the length of the breath, just notice what feels good. You can try longer breathing to start out with. And if long breathing feels good keep it up. If not, you can change. The important thing is that the breath is steady, your awareness is steady. There will be a sense of comfort that comes from this.

Try to maintain that sense of comfort and let it spread through the body. Think of it radiating out in all directions, but you don't leave the breath. If you leave the breath, it very quickly turns into delusion concentration, a state that's comfortable, with a nice fuzzy feeling, but you don't really know where you are. When you come out, you're not really sure: Were you awake? Were you asleep? That's not the kind of concentration you want. That's one where the feeling of comfort has overcome the mind.

You want to be like the person who has a job, gets a salary, but doesn't leave the work. He keeps on working, keeps on working, keeps on getting more salary. Don't be like the kind of person who gets a job and, after the first week, gets his first check, and then leaves the job to spend the check. Then when he's out of money, he comes back to look for work again. You

can come back only if the boss is kind, but even then, if you keep that up, you're never going to get a raise. You're never going to make any advancement.

You've got to make sure that your mindfulness stays with the breath steadily; your awareness stays with the breath steadily. Because we're here for more than just comfort in the present moment.

After all, where does the present moment lead? It leads to the future, and although there may be many things happening in the future that we can't anticipate, there are some things we can: aging, illness, and death. These are going to come for sure.

You need the qualities of mind that keep you safe, especially as death comes. Suddenly you find yourself stranded: You can't stay with the breath anymore. You can't stay with the body anymore—where are you going to go? The Buddha said that the mind will follow its craving, cling to its craving, whichever direction the craving may go.

Now, you would think that if that were the case, we would go only to places where we want. But that's assuming that we're very mindful and very alert to what's going on, and we don't let ourselves get distracted. But most people when they're sick, when they're in pain, jump for any distraction they can find as their way of escaping from the pain.

If it so happens that they die while they're in the midst of a distraction, they go whatever direction that distraction is. A lot of times the distractions are what? Sensual desire, ill-will, restlessness and anxiety, uncertainty. These things don't lead you to a good place. So you've got to make sure there are no gaps at all in your mindfulness. You have to be especially strict with yourself.

It's like learning a foreign language. If you're thinking that you're just going on a trip for a couple of weeks, or of reading a little bit in that language, you don't put too much effort into learning it; just enough to get by. But if you knew that you were going to be forced to emigrate to that country and have to live there every day, engage in all your activities in that language every day, you'd be a lot stricter with yourself. You'd be a lot more eager to really master the language.

And it's the same with meditation. To really master the concentration, you can't just be here for the comfort. You've got to be here for developing mindfulness, developing alertness, and gaining some insight into your defilements so that you'll be prepared when death comes.

When greed comes into the mind, why does it come? When anger comes, why does it come? You really have to be alert to see these things, because all too often when they come,

you just jump inside them, and go with them.

You don't see the steps: How is it that a thought forms in the mind? How does it become an emotion as it involves the breath, and then from the breath it gets into the body? How do you take on an identity within that emotion, and how do you get out?

If you can see these steps, then you can step out at any time. That way, you're a lot safer. You don't let yourself get overcome.

So we talk about directing the mind rightly. You set it in the right place, right here with the breath, and you work with the breath to make it comfortable; play with the breath to make it comfortable. But at the same time, reflect on what the mind is doing—be very careful to notice when you slip off.

Think of it: Down the line, as you're getting old and sick, and the body's really weak, where are you going to gain your strength? The strength has to come from within: the strength of your own conviction, your persistence, your mindfulness, your concentration, your discernment. These will be the only strengths you'll have at that time, and they're not the kind of strengths you can suddenly develop at the last moment. They have to be part of a lifelong process, a lifelong exercise program.

As we sit here and meditate, that's a major part of the program. As one of the Thai ajaans says, when you're exercising the body you move around a lot, but when you exercise the mind you try to make it still—both for the sake of concentration and for the sake of discernment.

Because once the mind is concentrated and you can maintain that concentration for a while, you begin to notice there are still little disturbances in the mind. At first they don't seem all that serious, but then you realize that if you really want the mind to be happy, content, totally undisturbed, then you've got to get rid of even the tiniest disturbances.

The tiny disturbances are going to show you where your defilements are. And it's good to catch them when they're small. If you wait until they're large, they've moved in, they've thrown you out of the house, and they've taken over.

So you have to remind yourself: You have to be alert to these things and catch them in time. As the Buddha said, it's through heedfulness that we don't die. "Heedfulness is the path to the deathless, heedlessness is the path to death. The heedful never die; the heedless are as if already dead."

I had a Zoom meeting with a group in France recently, and one woman asked the question, "You tell us to have a sense of well-being in the present moment, but then you also

tell us to think about death and rebirth. It's very unpleasant to think about that. Why can't we just be with the sense of pleasure in the present moment, and trust that until the time when we die, and that's the end of the matter?" And I said, "Well, it's not the end of the matter. You'll be going someplace dependent on what qualities you've developed in the mind."

As I said, it's like learning a foreign language. If you're learning it for fun, that's one thing. If you're learning because you realize your life is going to depend on it, you're going to put everything you can into mastering it.

This is how we get the most out of the meditation. We fulfill all three of those functions: having a sense of well-being in the present moment, developing mindfulness and alertness, and beginning to uproot the defilements of the mind. That way, we can be secure here in the present moment and secure in our future. That's what it means to have the mind rightly directed, your self rightly directed—heading towards the deathless.