

Stretch Your Mind

August 4, 2022

Make a survey of your body. Start with the toes; come up the legs. If you notice any tension in any of the muscles, see if you can relax it. Try to notice which muscles you use to tense up as you breathe in, and see if you can breathe in without tensing them up. Work your way up through the torso, the neck, the head. Then with the arms, start with the fingers, up the arms to the shoulders. See if your mind is willing to settle down with the sensation of the body as it relaxes here into the present moment. If it is, fine.

If it's not willing to settle down, you have to ask yourself what the problem is. What kind of thoughts does it tend to go toward? What thoughts are running through the mind that have some Velcro on them that pull you away? Try to think in a way that pulls you away from those thoughts, strips off the Velcro.

Think of the Buddha on the night of his awakening. If you think you have narratives coming in from the day, the first knowledge he gained on the first watch of the night gave him narratives going back thousands of eons. But he didn't get stuck on any of them. He noticed this, this, this: He was born in this place, looked like this, had this name, belonged to this clan, as he said—which could either be a clan as a human being, a species of animal, or a type of deva. Had this experience of pleasure and pain, ate this kind of food, and then died. He took birth in this way, again and again and again.

Just thinking about how many, many lifetimes he'd been through stretched his mind—stretched it so that, in linear terms, it was just too long to keep any particular detail from any particular life. That helped get him out of some of his narratives.

Then on the second watch, he had a question. He had noticed that in his first knowledge he'd been born as many different kinds of beings, from hell beings up to Brahmas. There was a theory back in those days, especially promoted by the brahmans, that wherever you were in this lifetime, you'd be born as that thing in the next lifetime. Brahman would be born as brahman; slaves would be born as slaves; dogs would be born as dogs. In other words, you were stuck where you were.

Of course, the brahmans liked that because it put them on the top of the heap. But the Buddha saw that that wasn't true. You can go up, you can go down, and sometimes it seems

very erratic. He compared it to a stick you throw into the air: Sometimes it lands on this end, sometimes it lands on that end, sometimes it lands splat in the middle.

He wondered if there was any pattern to all this. Why were there the changes? So he turned his mind to thinking of all beings dying and being reborn to see what the pattern was. And he figured out that it had to do with their actions. Skillful actions led to good rebirths; unskillful ones, to bad rebirths. It was a tendency, because of course, everybody's actions were basically a mix. And in particular it had to do with what kind of views they held at death.

That taught him a couple of things: one, the power of action; two, the power of your actions in the present moment. There are times when you could have done bad things in this lifetime, but of course, not all the things you did were bad. But at the moment of death, you developed right view, and that would help save you for a little while at least. It wouldn't totally wipe out the effects of past bad karma, but it would give you a reprieve for a while. And who knows, maybe like Angulimala you could train your mind so that it wouldn't have to suffer from those bad things.

So, seeing the power of the mind, seeing the power of the present moment, he then focused on his mind in the present moment in the third watch of the night.

You see what he's doing: He's stretching his mind before he settles in. With the body, we stretch it forward, stretch it back, to the left, right. But with the mind, when you stretch it, first you stretch it in terms of time. Just think of how long the time has been that you've been going through all these different narratives, to the point where they become meaningless. Then you expand it in terms of space. You think of all the universe. You're not the only one with lots of narratives. You're not the only one who's made a lot of mistakes. You're not the only one who's done things really cleverly.

The whole point of all this stretching is that it makes all of those narratives meaningless.

So when the mind tends to go to a particular narrative, try to put it in this perspective: either the perspective of deep time, wide space, or both. Then it's easier to let go. When the mind is small, it can easily hold on to these things. When you stretch it, these things slip from its grasp.

And *then* you can focus it, and you've got the right attitude to bring to your focus, because there will still be a commentary going on in the mind as you're trying to get the mind to settle down.

When things are going well, you remind yourself, "Don't get excited, because you've

botched it many times in the past.” Usually, something goes well, you get all worked up about it, and it’s gone. When things are not going well, don’t get depressed, don’t get discouraged. You’ve been through some pretty bad things in the past, too, but you were able to get past them. It’s when the mind is small that the narratives of your being a great meditator or a bad meditator have some meaning—and the meaning is not helpful. You want a larger meaning.

You’ve been through these patterns many times before. So learn how to wear your successes well and wear your mistakes well: Remember the successes so that you can try to recreate them the next time you meditate. When you’ve got something going well, try to get a sense of balance: “How do I keep this going without giving in to the urge to get worked up about it?” When things are not going well, watch out for the narrative that says, “Here it is, proof that you’re a hopeless meditator, you’ll never get anywhere.” That’s not going to help. You’ve been down before, and you’ve been able to bounce back up.

Like that other image the Buddha gives based on deep time: When you see somebody who’s really poor and miserable, remind yourself that you’ve been there. You see someone who’s really rich, with lots of power, lots of wealth, lots of beauty, whatever: You’ve been there, too. You’re not a stranger to anything in the universe. Think in that way.

So you want to learn from the ups and learn from the downs, so that the mind isn’t pushed up and down by them. Try to keep everything on an even keel. That’s a lot easier to do when the mind is large.

This is one of the reasons why, when the Buddha taught concentration practice, he never mentioned where in the body you should focus, say, when you’re focusing on the breath. He says, be aware of the whole body. When you’re spreading thoughts of goodwill, lots of compassion, empathetic joy, and equanimity, you make those large as well.

In fact, the phrase *mahaggatam cittam*, the enlarged mind, is a description of the mind in concentration. Sometimes, when we think about concentration, we think of the mind being focused down to one sharp point, but that’s not the concentration the Buddha was teaching. Fill your whole body with breath, fill your whole body with your awareness. Just don’t make your awareness so large that it leaves the body and goes someplace else. Keep it just large enough to fill this “fathom-long body.”

Then whatever comes in is not going to knock you off so easily. If your concentration is one pointed, then as soon as the point moves, the concentration has been disturbed. But if you have this larger framework, things can come in, things can go, and they don’t disturb things so

much.

It's like having animals run through your mind. If you're on one spot, they can knock you over. In other words, the distractions knock you over really easily. But if you have a large, well-founded building, they can run in and out, but they don't destroy anything because everything is large and solid inside. When you can bring this attitude to concentration, you find it's easier to get into concentration and to stay here. You're ready to do the work that needs to be done—seeing through the disturbances.

Once the mind has been nourished by the stillness, you can put it to work to see: What's the allure of the things that would pull you away? The best way to know the allure is to refuse to go with it. Part of the mind will say, "Come on, come on. I want this, I want that." Well why? Sometimes the mind will answer easily. Sometimes it'll be embarrassed.

In which case you have to keep watching, watching. But it's going to reveal itself at some point—why you like these things that go against your concentration. Then you compare the satisfaction you get out of the allure with all its drawbacks. This helps to pry you away from a lot of your attachments. You may still have your attachment to concentration, but for the time being, allow that, because it's a useful attachment. You can do lots of good work with that.

It's only when the outside work is done that you can turn the analysis in on the concentration itself to look for ups and downs in the disturbances there. Ask yourself, "What am I doing that's causing that?" Again, you have to watch, like someone posted to watch criminals in a building across the street. You have to sit there and watch very carefully, very, very patiently.

Ultimately, these things will reveal themselves. If your gaze is steady enough, and you ask the right questions, things will be revealed.

So work on that steady gaze. If anything threatens to really pull you away, maybe it's a sign you've got to stretch your mind again. Think back over deep time; think out over wide space. That makes it a lot easier to let go of the little things that would otherwise loom large.