

Strategic Wisdom

July 20, 2007

Close your eyes. Stay focused on the breath. You can focus on the feeling of the breath anywhere at all in the body, any spot where it's convenient, where the sensation of the breath is clear, that lets you know that now the breath is coming in, now the breath is going out. Try to stay there. Keep it up. This is the difficult part in the meditation: the maintaining. That's because the mind is like a committee, and not just an ordinary committee. It's like the Chicago City Council. Different members have different agendas. You don't know whose interests you're representing, and they don't want you to know whose interests they're representing.

What concentration does is that it brings some clarity to the mind. It's only when the mind is still, able to stay with one object for long periods of time, that it can really see things clearly. There are members of the committee, members of the city council, who don't like this. Some of them are the aging hippie surfers who just want to have fun. They're looking for entertainment. But then there are other ones whose motivations may be a little more devious, things that they don't want to have come to the surface.

So you've got to do your best to bring everybody on board. This is why meditation is not just a matter of the technique but also a matter of attitude, appreciating the good that comes from being clear inside—and it's good not just in a goody-two-shoes sense, it's good more in the sense of a genuine happiness.

This is one thing that every member of the committee can agree on, that we all want happiness. Every desire in the mind is a desire for happiness, a desire for pleasure, a desire for well-being. Think of some of those desires as ill-informed and some of them as well-informed. But as long as you're clear that this is all for the sake of true happiness, you've got common ground.

So learn to have some respect for that common ground. We want happiness that doesn't turn into something else, that doesn't turn on us. So when one member of the committee voices objections, during the meditation or after, you've got to be able to reason with that voice, point out that this really in your best interest to be able to get the mind to settle down and be still.

Think about all the times in the past when you had wrongheaded notions of happiness that got you into trouble. Ask yourself, do you want to go through that again? And why did you give in to those wrongheaded notions? Partly because you didn't know better. And sometimes even when you did know better, you weren't

mindful, you weren't alert. You lied to yourself and suddenly found yourself going in that direction, and you ended up suffering.

So ask yourself, do you want to go through that again? There are ways not to repeat your old mistakes, the first of which is to recognize your mistakes as mistakes. A second one is to fortify the mind in such a way that it doesn't make those mistakes again. This is precisely what mindfulness, alertness, all the qualities that lead to concentration, and of course concentration itself: This is what they provide. You keep thorough watch on the mind to see when its desires are getting out of line, when its desires are actually counterproductive.

Know again, as I said, that there are some members of the committee who don't want that. They don't to be seen for what they are. But you can remind them that they're here for the sake of happiness, so wouldn't they want a happiness that's really true happiness, a happiness that's lasting? Do whatever you can to reason with them.

The Buddha has an interesting test for wisdom. He said it's your ability—once you see that there's something you like to do but it's going to give bad results—your ability to talk yourself into not doing it. In other words, wisdom knows not just cause and effect, but also how to manipulate cause and effect in the mind. It's strategic. It understands how to get you to abandon the things you'd like to do but give bad results. When there are things that you don't like to do but are going to give good results, your wisdom or discernment lies in the ability to talk yourself into doing them. Again, it's strategic. It uses whatever little tricks you may need in order to get the mind to abandon its unskillful habits and to develop skillful ones, whatever little rewards you can promise yourself for doing the right thing, sometimes little punishments for doing the wrong thing, and your ability to keep a good humor about the whole process. Don't be grim and puritanical about it. Remind yourself, we're here for the sake of happiness.

Ajaan Suwat talked often about the right attitudes to bring to the concentration practice. The first is respect, realizing that this is an important skill you've got to develop, something that's been handed down for centuries by people who knew what they were doing. And the opportunity you have to practice concentration is an invaluable opportunity, so you bring respect.

You should also have an attitude of what's called *pasada*, which can be translated as clarity or confidence. It's essentially the mind's good mood about the whole thing, happy that you've got this opportunity. That combination of respect and joy in the practice makes it a lot easier. After all, it can seem tedious sometimes to just bring the mind back to the breath, back to the breath, back to the breath. "It's been wandering off, got to bring it back to the breath again." And

you've got to be stubborn in staying with the breath once you've got your awareness there. No matter what other reasons you may have for wanting to wander off, you've got to say, no, no, no, no, no. Learn to say no with a smile, but stick with your no.

When I came back from Thailand to help set up the monastery, my older brother, who's a professor of business administration, had lots of ideas for how we could get the monastery going. They were all business ideas and were not going to work in the monastery paradigm. After giving me his ideas for several minutes, he turned to me and say, "You know, you're pulling this Thai trick on me. You're smiling, which means you don't accept what I'm saying." I said, "That's right." But it's an effective trick. If you argue with people who are giving you advice you don't want, you just make things worse. So you smile. It makes a lot easier when you say No with a smile than when you say No with a frown.

So learn how to deal with your committee members that way. In other words, keep the lines of communication open but at the same time be firm: "No, we're not going there, we're not going to remember what happened yesterday or the day before, we're not going to make plans for next week's job. We want to stay right here." And of course, you can learn how to use the breath to help maintain that sense of a good mood. Breathe in a way that feels refreshing to the body, that feels good to stay here and feels good in trying to maintain that.

As Ajaan Fuang once said, the sense of fullness, the sense the rapture you can develop through the breath is the lubricant that keeps meditation going. Without that lubricant, things dry up. Like a motor, things seize up and stop. So one immediate proof for the pleasure-seeking parts of the mind that this is a good thing is just that ability to breathe in a way that feels really good, really gratifying deep down inside. So ask yourself, what kind of breath would feel gratifying right now? Allow the body to breathe in that way.

So learning to strategize is an important part of your meditation. That's where the discernment comes in, because in getting the mind to settle down, it's not that the discernment comes only after the mind really is still. The process of getting the mind to settle down does require some wisdom, it requires some discernment, requires you using your intelligence and your ingenuity. That kind of concentration has discernment built into it. You're already learning some important lessons in cause and effect—and some lessons in the paradoxes of strategy. There are aspects to wisdom that you might not expect, but when you find that they work, it's still Dhamma. It's no less Dhamma because of the fact that you thought it up and discovered and used it and got results. Even if it's not in the texts, the fact it does lead to a lasting happiness means that it's Dhamma.

When the Buddha gave a set of criteria for deciding what is Dhamma and what's not Dhamma, he didn't say you have to prove that the Buddha himself actually said it. You look instead at the results it leads to. Does it help do away with passion? Does it help to do away with being fettered? Does it make you less of a burden both for yourself and the people around you? These are the sorts of things that determine what's Dhamma and what's not.

So if you find that it liberates the mind from its unskillful agendas, then you've found some Dhamma. And that's something worthy of respect.

So have some respect for this practice, have some respect for the goal of putting an end to suffering and finding true happiness. There's so much out in the world that's cynical and sarcastic, and we tend to pick up a lot of those attitudes. The idea that there's really nothing good in life, there's really nobody you can trust at all: On the one hand, these ideas seem to protect us but on the other hand, they also defeat us. It's better to have respect and confidence in the idea that there was somebody who found an end to suffering and he taught it freely. And people have been getting good results from those instructions for the past 2,600 years. Trust in that fact is what opens the door and keeps the door open for your own ability to put an end to suffering, too.