

Be Observant

August 14, 2007

Breathe in comfortably; breathe out comfortably. Focus on the sensation of breathing anywhere in the body that feels convenient, that feels natural for you to stay focused on. Some people find it natural to stay focused on the nose, others on the chest or at the abdomen. Focus anywhere where there's a sensation that tells you now you're breathing in, now you're breathing out.

And allow that sensation of the comfortable. You may have to experiment a little bit with the breathing to make it comfortable. Try long breathing to begin with, to see how that feels. If it feels comfortable, stick with it. If not, you can change: in long, out short; in short, out long; in short, out short; deep, shallow, heavy, light. Notice what rhythm and texture of the breathing feels best. There's nobody to tell you that you're right or wrong. You have to notice for yourself.

This is an important principle in the practice, that we meditate to develop our powers of observation, because all the truths we need to discover for the sake of true happiness are right here, simply that we don't notice them. And the reason we don't notice them is because we're not very observant.

So you want to develop your powers of observation. Start with the breath because the breath is nearby, and the movements of the breath are more obvious than the movements of the mind. Ultimately, you're going to want to turn around and look at the mind itself, but the mind is extremely subtle and fast. So you practice first with things that are a little bit slower, more blatant. Try to see where you force the breath in ways that are uncomfortable.

A lot of us have some old habits in our breathing process that may not be the best for the body or best for the mind. So try to observe, when you breathe in and breathe out: How do you decide whether the breath is long enough, or too long or too short? When you intentionally breathe in, what do you think you're doing? Where does the breath start? Where does it stop? Which muscles are the ones that actually bring the breath in? Explore your assumptions—and you may change them. In other words, look for the slightest sense of dis-ease or discomfort that you might find in the breath and then see what you can do to change so that that dis-ease or discomfort will go away.

This is an important tactic in the practice. We're looking for happiness but we're focusing first on dis-ease and discomfort. The Buddha's first topic in his very first Dhamma talk was stress and suffering. And it may seem strange. Here we are,

looking for happiness, and yet we start with that chant on aging, illness, and death, separation. But it's not really strange.

There are actually two ways of looking for happiness. One is to pretend that there isn't any suffering and to try to view the world in a way that the suffering goes away or doesn't matter. The other way is to look squarely at the suffering to see why it's there. When you see why it's there, then you can let go of the cause. When you let go of the cause, the suffering goes away. When you think about it, the second approach makes more sense. Because no matter how much you want to dress up aging, illness, and death with flowers and icing, it's still aging, illness, and death. It's still miserable.

If you don't believe it, go to an old folks' home. See what happens when people grow older. It's not like a flower withering. The flower withering doesn't feel anything. But when people grow old, they start losing their faculties, losing control of their bodies. It's really miserable. Or you can be with someone who's dying and you see how miserable that is, the idea that life would have to end in this way.

The test is: Can you find a happiness that can maintain its solidity in the face of these things? That's a happiness that you can trust. The happiness that depends on dressing things up is sure for a fall.

So you want to look into yourself to see what ways you're choosing your thoughts, your words, your deeds that actually lead to suffering. Then can you change your ways, change your assumptions, change the way you do things, so that the mind can be free from suffering? One of the Buddha's important insights is that even though there is the stress of change, of aging, illness, and death, the mind doesn't have to suffer from these things as long as it doesn't hang on to the things that age, grow ill, and die. As you learn how not to hang on, first learn how to hang on intelligently.

In other words, you hang on to certain things as the path rather than as ends in themselves. For instance, you don't identify with the body. You don't identify with the thoughts. Just because a thought comes into your mind doesn't mean it has to be your thought or that you have to run with it. You have your choice to take it or not.

The same with the body: You have your choice of doing something or not doing it, particularly in connection to how you relate to pains in the body, feelings of stress in the mind. You don't deny that they're there, but at the same time you don't have to pull them in.

In order to learn this skill, you have to be very observant. This is why the Buddha said that the path is not a sudden one. He says it's like the continental

shelf off of India. It slopes very gradually, going out for long ways before there's a sudden drop-off. In the same way, he said, the practice is a gradual practice before there's the insight of awakening, the knowledge of someone who is totally awakened.

The reason for that again is not a matter of just seeing something or knowing something, being told something that would make all the difference in your life. The path we're practicing is a skill, and skills take time. You have to be observant, you have to learn from what you've observed. Gradually, over time, the skill gets more and more precise, your powers of observation get better and better, until finally you see precisely where you're causing stress and you don't have to.

The words *insight* or *discernment* don't mean learning a general truth about things. They mean seeing very precisely, seeing distinctions. For instance, you may see a pain in the body, but you can also see that there's suffering in the mind. The two are two different things and they're caused in different ways. The pain in the body may be a natural part of having a body, but the suffering in the mind is not necessary. You have to be able to make this distinction.

This is why the Buddha has us look very carefully at things that arise and pass away, so that we can see precisely what's arising, what's passing away, what depends on what, and which parts are optional. In particular, you want to see that the mental stress and suffering are optional.

This requires very subtle powers of observation, which can be developed. Seeing connections, seeing distinctions, requires that you look very, very carefully. So take the time to watch what you're doing. Start with the breath, and eventually the breath becomes a mirror for the mind. As you adjust the breath, there's a sense of ease. Allow that sense of ease to spread through the body. Develop the potentials for happiness that you have here, because you're going to need them as part of your path.

After all, so much of the path requires looking at things that you'd rather not look at. We grew up liking to look at flowers or to look at mountains, but here we're looking at our breath to see where there's stress. In particular, we're learning to see where we've made lots of false assumptions, or to put in very simple terms, where we've been stupid and nonobservant. Nobody likes to see those things. So to put yourself in the right mood to see them, try to breathe in a way that allows a sense of pleasure to suffuse throughout the whole body, all the way down through the nerves, through the blood vessels, out the pores of skin, all around the body. There are ways of breathing, of relating to the breath, that allow you to do that.

So try to be observant. Learn what those ways are, because that puts you in a position where you can look very carefully at where the real cause of stress and

suffering is, where the real pain in life is—so that you can look at it and not run away from it. You can look at and understand it, comprehend it. Once you comprehend it, then you can learn to let it go.

So instead of running away from the suffering, you face it square on and you see right through it. The happiness that comes from that is a happiness you can depend on. It's a happiness that won't let you down.