

The Time & Place to Let Go

April 10, 2009

Close your eyes and focus on the breath. Watch it as it comes in; watch it as it goes out. Notice how it feels. Notice where you feel it most predominantly. It might be at the nose, the rising and falling of the chest, the rise and fall of the abdomen, or anywhere in the body where you can clearly sense: Now the breath is coming in; now the breath is going out. And be very careful to notice when it's comfortable and when it's not. Don't put too much pressure on it.

If it doesn't feel satisfying, try breathing deeper. If it feels too strung out, let the breath grow shorter, more shallow. Allow it to find a rhythm and texture that feels just right for the body right now, so that no tension builds up as you breathe in, and you don't hold on to any tension as you breathe out—so that the breathing process feels refreshing, energizing, soothing. After all, the breath has that special quality: It can be good both for the body and for the mind. And although our prime interest right now is the mind, still the body could use a little help. If you're thinking too much, worrying too much, it's going to have an effect on the health of the body. And because the breath is the basic energy that keeps the body going, it only stands to reason that if the breath can feel really good and refreshing and energizing, it'll help the body in other ways as well. When the body feels better, the mind has a chance to settle down and have some rest, to gather its strength.

And for the time being, you don't have to think about any other responsibilities at all. This is your major responsibility: allowing the body and the mind to heal. An important part of training the mind is having a good sense of time and place, what you're going to pick up to think about, what you're going to put down. We all have our responsibilities in the course of the day, but you can't allow the mind to carry them around all the time. It's not the case that if you think about something for 24 hours, the thinking is going to get better, and you're going to understand the problem better. There are limits to how much the mind can do before it needs rest.

So this is a basic principle in learning how to care for the mind. When you find that this is the right time and place to settle down, okay, settle down. As for anything else that would come into the range of your awareness that would pull you away, you say, "No, not now. Some other time."

Because the mind needs its own space, it needs its own time to rest and recuperate. And it needs tools in order to deal with other things that might come in and distract you.

This is where the Buddha's teachings on not-self are useful. They're often misunderstood as the Buddha saying there is no self, which he never said. In fact, he said that to say that there is no self is wrong view, to say that there *is* a self gets you tied up in a tangle of views, too. What he wants you to do is see that your sense of what you are, or who you are, and what your responsibilities are, is something you choose to pick up and put down.

All too often we do it without thinking. There's that old conundrum that comes from Buddhism 101 in a lot of colleges where you first hear about Buddhism: "If there is no self, what does the karma? What gets reborn?" That's taking the issue backwards. The issue is: Given that there is karma, what does this teaching on not-self mean in the context of karma? It's a type of action. It is a type of karma. You have to figure out when it's skillful, when it's not; in which ways it is skillful and which ways it's not.

So for anything that would pull you away or adds extra burdens to the mind that are unnecessary, the thinking or the perception of not-self is a useful tool to have to cut them away. You can say, "Well, it's really not myself, it's not really mine." Even your own body: At some point, you're going to have to give up. But in the meantime while it's useful, while you can get it to sit when you want it to sit, and lie down when you want it to lie down, and work when you want it to work, make use of the amount of control that you do have over it. And be selective in what you're going to latch on to as your responsibility right now. That's learning how to have a sense of time and place for your sense of self, or for your sense of what belongs to you or is your responsibility right now.

Right now you have the responsibility of getting the mind to stay focused, so you can identify with that. But as for other things that might come up that demand your attention, you can say, "Wait a minute, you're not really me, you're not really mine. I don't need you right now. This is not the time and place." As long as you're going to keep changing your sense of who you are and what your responsibilities are and where the limits of your responsibilities extend, try to do it skillfully.

We start doing this as little kids. If you've got a little brother, and someone down the street is beating up on him, you go down to defend him. After all, he is your little brother, you've got to defend him or at least take him home to safety. There's a very strong sense of "this is my brother." But then you get home and you start playing together and your little brother takes your truck, and all of a sudden,

he's not your brother anymore. He's a stranger who is taking what belongs to you, or he's the Other out there taking what's yours. Your sense of self has changed its boundaries immediately.

We do this all the time. When you stay at home, you have one sense of who you are, what your responsibilities are, what your role is. When you go to work, you're a different person. When you're engaged in mental activity, the body gets put aside and you identify with your thoughts or your feelings. Then there are the times when you're very much your body. So as long as our sense of who we are keeps changing all the time—you might say it's a verb, "selfing," we self in different ways—an important part of the practice is learning how to do it skillfully. Have a sense of when it's skillful to identify with something and when it's not. When does it add unnecessary burdens? When does it get in the way of what really needs to be done. If you don't have this sense of learning how to dis-identify, then if a responsibility comes up, or there's an issue in your life that you keep worrying about, it totally takes over. You lose sense of how you need to train the mind and give it time to recover.

The classic image is of a knife that needs to be sharpened. If you just keep using it to cut, cut, cut, cut, cut all the time, it gets dull and it takes a lot more energy to cut. You do a sloppy job. Yet you just keep on cutting, cutting, cutting because you think this stuff has got to get cut. But the wise person knows that if you really want to cut through somethings, you have to stop cutting for a while so that you can allow the knife a chance to get sharpened. Then, once it's sharpened, you can start cutting again. So whatever the responsibility might be during the time when you're sharpening your knife, you don't want to be thinking about that. You don't want to concern yourself with that. You want to do a good job of sharpening the knife, especially if you sharpen it in the old way where you just have a large whetstone and you have to give it all your attention so that you don't ruin the blade. Then when it's sharp, you can come back to your work and with just one chop, cut right through things.

So an important part of caring for the mind is having a sense of time and place, what things you should think about, and when you find that the thinking is not getting anywhere. Then you stop, no matter how much it might scream at you: "I've got this problem. I've got to work at it." Say, "Look, I can't deal with it right now. The mind isn't ready for it. The mind needs to be cared for. The mind needs to be looked after." It's your most important tool, so you treat it well.

Like right now: This is a time for getting the mind to be still. It's not a time to be thinking about issues at home, issues at work, tomorrow or the next day or yesterday. It's time to allow the mind to stay right here with the present moment,

because that's the most restful thing you can do for it. Allow the mind to stay with the sensation of really nice breathing. Ask yourself, "What kind of breathing would feel really good right now? Just one really good breath." It's all you have to concern yourself with, one good breath at a time.

Then think of the breathing as a whole-body process. It's not just that you sense it at one spot in the body. There are *many* areas in the body where you can sense the breathing process. As the mind gets more still, it notices more of these breathing sensations. It's like listening to a piece of music. The more still you get your mind, the more you can hear what's going on—the subtle things that you would otherwise miss.

That way, the breath becomes more and more absorbing, more interesting. And when it feels really good, the boundary between your awareness and the breath seems to dissolve, so that you're one with the breathing. The awareness and the breathing are right there together. They seem to melt into each other, so that the breath fills your awareness, and your awareness fills the body, the breath. Then you just allow them to stay together that way for a while. This is where it gets really healing. There will be a sense of ease, a sense of refreshment. This is healing both for the body and for the mind. Don't tell yourself, "Well, a few seconds of that is enough." Sometimes you need a long time.

One of the problems when people meditate is that they get in a hurry. "I've done that. What's the next?" Well, allow this step to have its effect. Especially if the mind's been worn down for a long time, it needs to stay with its medicine. So again, whatever little voices come nibbling away at your awareness, saying, "You've got to think about this. You want to go on to that," just say, "No. This is all I need right now. This is what I need right now."

Again, it's a matter of having a sense of time and place with the rhythms of the mind. If it's been distracted and weighed down by its concerns for a long time, sometimes it's good to have a good long stretch of just being really quiet, just breathing in a sense of oneness, when the mind is with one object and that one object fills your awareness. If there's a sense of ease anywhere in the body, allow it to seep through the whole body. If there's a sense of fullness in any part of the body, allow it to stay full all the way through the in-breath, all the way through the out-breath. In other words, don't squeeze it out when you breathe out. If the breath has to go out, it'll do it on its own. You don't have to push it out. And then just drink in that sense of refreshment. This is how you heal the body and heal the mind, so that when the time comes that you actually have to put them to work, they're ready to go to work. You've cared for them properly.

So we have this whole hour. There's really nothing else you have to do right now. Just learn how to be with the breath. And any thoughts that nibble away at the mind, saying, "You've got to think about that, think about this," learn how to say, "No, not now." If they come up again, remind them, "No, not now." Don't get discouraged if they keep coming back. It's an old habit you've got to unlearn. Sometimes that takes time.

But even if the whole hour is spent just saying, "No, not now," to those thoughts, it's an hour well spent. You're developing new habits, learning how to distance yourself from the things that come up in the mind. You don't have to be responsible for them all the time. You don't have to take them on all the time. You don't even have to finish them all the time. A thought comes up and hasn't really gotten coherent, you don't have to make it coherent before you let it go. Allow it to drop away, even though you haven't figured out yet what it's about. Then ask yourself that question again: "What would be a really good breath to breathe right now?" One good breath at a time. And you'll find that the hour will be over before you know it.