

Right View, Right Attention

November 3, 2019

Focus on your breath and make a determination: Any thoughts that are related to the breath are okay. Any thoughts not related to the breath or to you mind in the present moment, you'll put them aside. And then try to stick with that determination. You're applying the quality that the Buddha calls "appropriate attention." Yesterday we talked about the frameworks of right view. But it's one thing to have right view, and it's another thing to actually apply it. Appropriate attention is the quality of mind that takes what you've learned from right view about what's skillful and what's not skillful, what leads to suffering, what leads away from suffering, and actually applies that knowledge—in this case, each time you breathe in, each time you breathe out.

What this means is that you're approaching the present moment with some ideas in mind. You're not simply open to whatever's going to come up, willing to follow whatever comes up. You have a purpose in being here—to develop the path, develop right mindfulness, right concentration—because you realize that those qualities are necessary if you're going to have any chance at all to get past your suffering, to get past the stress that you create for yourself.

So even though certain thoughts might seem intriguing, and maybe at some point they'll be worth following, right now this is not the time for that. Think of the Buddha's instructions for right speech: that it be true, beneficial, and timely. Well, you can try to apply the same standards to your thoughts. A thought comes up: Is it true or not true? Is it beneficial, not beneficial? Is this the right time and place for it? Even things with that are true and beneficial, if they're not appropriate for what you're doing right now, just put them aside.

We tend to go through life with a lot of thoughts running through our minds. It's like a cloud of thoughts. This thought comes, that thought comes in. Some of them hang around for a while, others come and go. And it's up to us to decide which ones we want to focus our attention on. So it's good to have some ideas about what's worth focusing your attention on and what's not.

If you were working on a project that required a lot of ingenuity, a lot of creativeness, creativity, you might say, "Okay, I'll be open to whatever." But the mind has some unfinished business. It has a habit of taking something that could be perfectly innocent and creating a lot of stress and a lot of suffering around it. Even though nobody wants to create suffering—everything we do, say, and think is for the purpose is finding some well-being, some happiness—yet we find that we do create stress, we do create pain, we do create suffering for ourselves. Because we're not paying attention—or we're paying attention to the wrong things.

So think about the Buddha when he first found the right path, which was to divide his thoughts into two types: those that were skillful, those that were not, based on where they came from and what they did to the mind. With the kinds of thoughts based on sensuality, ill will, and harmfulness, he would put them aside, put them aside—because he saw that those thoughts would lead to harm, lead to suffering, either for himself or for others. As for thoughts that were based on renunciation—in other words, looking for pleasure in ways other than sensuality, based on goodwill, based on compassion: Those were okay to think. But even then, you realize that if you think about those for a long period of time, the mind gets tired. That’s why he inclined his mind into concentration.

So you try to apply the same standards right now. This is a time for concentration so that anything that’s not related to the breath, just put it aside and hold onto the breath. This requires three qualities. Right view, remembering that the stress and suffering that the mind feels is not something that comes from outside. It’s our own clinging. It’s something we do. You might say suffering is an active verb, not a passive one. The cause is also something we’re doing. But we don’t have to do these things. If we bring knowledge to the ways in which we fashion our present moment, we can actually turn it into a path to the end of suffering.

So that’s right view. Right mindfulness keeps that in mind: that we want to develop skillful qualities and to abandon unskillful ones. So each time you breathe in, each time you breathe out, you ask yourself, “Where is my mind right now? Is it with the breath?” If it’s not, you bring it to the breath.

That’s what right effort does. If it *is* with the breath, you try to get more sensitive to how the breathing feels. As the Buddha said, you can breathe in ways that give rise to pleasure, breathe in ways that give rise to rapture, fullness, a sense of well-being right here.

So you experiment. What kind of breathing feels good right now? What kind of breathing would lead to a sense of pleasure? When you find something that feels good, you stick with it, but don’t go on automatic pilot, because the rhythm that feels good right now may not feel so good five minutes from now. So you keep on top of this: “What does the body need right now?” And watch out for the mind’s tendency to say, “Okay, I’ve figured out that problem, what’s next?”

The next problem is how to maintain that sense of well-being, how to let it grow. In the beginning it may not feel like much. It’s okay, but just okay. The question is, how do you protect what’s okay so it has a chance to grow into something more than okay? This is where mindfulness and effort have to keep going, keep going, keep going. Otherwise, the mind will start grasping onto whatever is there in that cloud of thoughts.

So you try to approach the present moment with a purpose. You're going to make this present moment into a path, to bring it in line with the Buddha's path. As you do this, you begin to realize the extent to which you have been shaping the present moment all along, and the extent to which you can do it more skillfully. For most of us, we ride from one train of thought to another train of thought, hopping trains like a hobo, ending up on the Grand Siberian Railroad and wondering, "How did we get there?"

So the train of thought you want right now is the one that says, "Stay with the breath. We're going to make a path. And we're going to make it pleasant." If it's not pleasant, the mind is not going to want to stay. It'll grab anything. So as you're focusing on the breath, this is how you talk to yourself: "Stay right here. Stay right here." And if a voice comes up and says, "This is boring," you say, "Drop that thought." Another ones come up and says, "This is kind of dumb, no new thoughts have come up for the past hour." Drop that thought.

Remind yourself, "Sometimes it's okay to be dumb. It's okay to be uncreative." You're working on a task, you're working on a skill. And it's not that this is not going to require your ingenuity. You'll need to figure out ways to work with the breath, asking yourself, "Where does the mind feel a sense of depletion? Where does the body feel a sense of depletion right now? Can I breathe in a way that gives rise to a sense of fullness there? What is the perception I'm holding in mind of the breath? How can I change that perception so that it feels more satisfying, more refreshing?"

Concentration does require that you engage your mind, engage your thoughts, until everything feels just right: a sense of balance in the body, balance in the mind. Then you can simply just be with the breath, ride it all the way through as it goes in, out, in, out, without jumping off between the ins and the outs. Make your attention smooth and continuous. That'll help make the breath become more smooth and continuous. And you can create a sense of really feeling at home here, feeling like you really belong. Because this is a state of mind that allows you to watch the mind and not feel hungry for jumping at whatever.

If the mind is hungry, then anything that comes along looks like a good snack. If it's been engaged in something unskillful, it'll try to distract itself with whatever. But here you're engaged in something skillful, with a sense of refreshment, a sense of fullness. Other thoughts come up, and things that used to be attractive are suddenly not so attractive anymore. Things that used to be tempting are not so tempting anymore.

It's like standing at a bus stop in the city. If you're exposed to the rain and the wind, if you've been standing there for a long time feeling tired, any bus that comes along you're going to jump on without even checking: "Where does this bus go? Who is driving it?" But if you've got a bus stop with a roof to

protect it, where you feel comfortable sitting there, the buses come up, you can be very picky about which ones you're going to get on.

So investigate and see how you can make this a pleasant place to be. And as I said earlier, in the beginning it may seem just okay, nothing really dramatic. But don't throw okay away. Protect it. It's like a seed. You plant a seed for a redwood, a little tiny tree comes out, and you say, "This doesn't look like a redwood," and you pull it out and throw it away. If you keep that up, you'll never get the redwood you want. But if you recognize, "This shows promise," and you protect it, water it, and nurture it, then someday it will provide you with shade.

There's a quality the Buddha calls "having the self rightly directed." This is what he means. You give direction to the present moment by bringing appropriate attention to apply each time you breathe in, each time you breathe out, using right mindfulness to remember right view, and right effort to carry through with the duties appropriate to what's actually happening, right here right now. That's how you make the most out of the present moment: not viewing it as an end in of itself, but as a path to something much greater.