

Training for Happiness

May 14, 2005

Try to sit comfortably. Keep your back erect so that you can sit for a long period of time. If you slouch over, it's going to get uncomfortable after a while. Place your hands in your lap. Close your eyes.

And then breathe comfortably. Notice what kind of breathing feels good. That's all you have to pay attention to right now, just the breath. Any other thoughts that come into your mind, you can let them go. Try to be sensitive to how the breathing feels. When it comes in, does it feel good? It is too long? Is it too short? If it feels too long or too short, you can adjust it. Is it too heavy? Is it too light? What kind of breathing really feels good right now? The more consistently you stay with the breath, the more easily you'll see this, and the more easily you'll be able to judge what feels right for the body right now.

It's amazing: We've lived with the breath ever since we are born but we very rarely notice it that much. Yet it has a lot of potential for giving rise to a sense of ease and well-being inside. If the breath feels constricted, not only does it feel bad in the present moment, but it's also bad for your health.

So think of the whole body breathing in, the whole body breathing out, in whatever way feels good right now. Try to breathe in a way that feels refreshing. And try to keep your awareness with the breath.

The Buddha once said that when the mind is trained, it brings happiness. In fact, the source of happiness is learning how to train your mind. And how does the mind need training? Well, look at it. One of the first things you notice when you try to keep your attention with the breath is that it doesn't stay. All of a sudden you find yourself off thinking about something else. And the slightest thing can set it off from the outside. There may be a noise, or maybe a pain in your body. Or some vagrant memory may come floating up in your mind and take you off with it.

What you rarely realize is that the mind made a choice to go with those things. It happens so quickly that we hardly notice it. This is called the mind that hasn't been trained. It's out of control. Just try to keep it with something as simple and basic and easy as the breath, and you find it difficult. It always seems to want to go off someplace else. So you have to pull it back. As soon as you catch it, bring it back. That's the training.

In other words, you want to be more and more sensitive to what the mind is doing. And you find, over time, that you can catch it more quickly. This develops

two qualities: mindfulness and alertness. Mindfulness is the act of keeping something in mind. Like right now: You're going to keep the breath in mind. You tell yourself that that's what you want to do while you're here sitting meditating. Alertness then keeps watch over what's actually happening: keeps watch over the breath to make sure that it's comfortable, and keeps watch over the mind to make sure it's going to stay. If you catch it slipping off, bring it right back. Catch it slipping off again, bring it back again.

Keep at this until you find that the mind is more and more willing to stay, and it'll be more willing to stay because the breath is comfortable. So work on focusing on that. What feels really good right now as you breathe in? What feels good as you breathe out? If you find that the needs of the body change in terms of what kind of breathing feels good, well, let the breathing change in order to keep supplying the body with the kind of breath that feels good with each breath coming in, each breath going out.

As with any training, if there's just the stick, the mind is going to rebel. You need a carrot as well. You need some rewards for the mind. So you reward it with comfortable breathing. That way, the mind begins to settle down a little bit more. You begin to see your own mind a lot more clearly. Because the movements of the mind are very quick, your mindfulness has to be quick as well. Your alertness has to be sharp, so that if the mind moves, you know. When you know, you're more and more in a position to make wise choices as to how the mind should go.

If it seems that the mind automatically feels fear when there's something threatening, or anger when there's something displeasing, that's because you're not quick enough to see the steps. There actually are times when nothing displeasing is happening, and yet the mind cooks up things to get angry about. It's actually looking for something to get angry about even before there's anything there. That can happen. Or sometimes the mind does to react outside stimuli, but it all seems so quick and automatic that it seems that it has to be that way.

That's because the mind isn't trained yet. Its mindfulness isn't steady enough. Its alertness isn't quick enough. So we keep falling into our old habits. Whatever way we used to react to things, that's the way we just keep on reacting.

Part of this is because we're not quick enough; the other part is because we don't understand the ways of the mind. We don't understand how much choice it has. This is why the Buddha spent so much time teaching about karma, the principle of action. Every moment, he says, we experience not only the results of our past actions, but also the results of our intentions in the present moment. You can't change your past actions, but you *can* change your present intentions. The thing is that they're there so much of the time that we hardly notice them. They

move so quickly that they pass us by in a blur—even though they are our intentions.

If we were totally subject to our past actions, there'd be nothing we could do. But it's because we have this potential for putting a present intention in with every moment, that's what gives us our freedom. That's the part we want to train, so that we're clear about what the intentions are, and we have a better sense of our range of choices.

When you understand this point, then you can start looking for where there's the choice in the present moment. Sometimes it's simply deciding which thought to focus on, or which sensation to focus on. That in and of itself is pretty important. You could sit here thinking about all the horrible things that have happened to you, and you can get very, very upset about that. Everybody has had bad things happen in their lives. But focusing on the bad things that have happened just gets you in a worse mood, and you're more likely to do foolish things. Or you can focus on what you've done in the past, either the things you've done in the past that were wrong or the things you've done that were right. Instead of focusing on how much you are a victim of circumstances, you can focus on how much control you've had over things.

When you think in that way, it'll have a very different effect on the mind. And when you have a sense of your own power, you learn also how to be more heedful, wise, careful in how you exercise that power.

This is why the way you view things is so important. If you think of yourself as a passive victim, you're not likely to be careful about what you do. You'll tend to thrash around, simply reacting to events. But if you have a greater and greater sense of how much you *are* in control, you begin to look for what ways you can make good use of that control, good use of that power. You're more likely to learn what works and what doesn't work as far as making yourself happy.

This is why the Buddha's path is not just one of doing a meditation practice, but it's also a matter of having right views, understanding the principle of action, how action can lead to happiness, how action can lead to suffering, and learning to be more and more sensitive to this power of choice you have in the present moment.

So when you develop mindfulness and concentration, try to do it with right view as well. The view is what opens the possibility that you can exercise your power of choice over your emotions, your reactions. When the meditation allows you to confirm that, you begin to see, yeah, you really do have the choice. You could sit here focusing on the breath, or you could sit focusing on your plans for

tomorrow, your memories of yesterday, things that make you happy, things that make you sad. You have that choice.

It's very clear to see while you're sitting here very still. It's not so easy to see when you're in the midst of quick events. But if you develop your mindfulness here, develop your alertness here, and try to carry that mindfulness and alertness into the rest of your life, you begin to see, yeah, you do have a choice even when things are happening very fast. It's simply a matter of where you focus your attention, and how consistent your attention is, how consistent your focus is. Once you see the moments you're making the choices, then you have a better chance of making wise choices.

That's why the mind, when it's trained, brings happiness—because only when it's trained can you catch it in time, direct it in time, so that it keeps on choosing to do the skillful thing, the thing that leads to happiness both for yourself and the people around you. Without that training, happiness is pretty much hit-or-miss. With that training, you find that you can make the wise choice in any set of circumstances.

It's how you use your power of choice that makes all the difference in the world.