

The World of the Body

April 10, 2006

Focus on your breath. Know when it's coming in; know when it's going out. Notice where you feel the breath, the sensations that let you know that now the breath is coming in, now the breath is going out. Give all your attention to those sensations. Notice whether they're comfortable or not. If they're not, you can change them. You can change the rate of the breath. You can breathe shorter or longer, faster or slower, deeper or more shallow. You can change the texture of the breath. You can make it heavy or light.

Try to become sensitive to what feels best for the body, what feels best for the mind right now. As for other thoughts that may come to the mind, you can let them go. Try to stay in the world of the body right here. The mind is used to living in lots of different worlds. You've got the world of family, the world of work, the world of school, the world of the highway, the world of being a shopper. We live in different worlds and, in each of those worlds, we play a different role. The mind is very quick to change worlds, to change its frame of reference, and then to change the roles it plays within those frames of reference.

But you may notice that as you change, there's a moment of blanking out. It's like when they change the sets on a play. They have to pull the curtain down, then they change all the furniture, change the backdrop, then they pull the curtain up, and you're in a whole new world. If you were to watch them changing the sets, it would destroy the illusion. So there has to be a moment of invisibility. And it's the same with the mind. When you change from one world for the next, there's that moment of blanking out.

These are the sorts of things you want to notice as you meditate. You blank out for a minute and suddenly find yourself in another world. After a while, you realize, "I'm not supposed to be here. I'm supposed to be with the breath." So you come back. What you want to fight is that tendency to blank out. There will be a point where the mind actually chooses. It gets bored with the breath. Something else comes up, and you're interested in finding out: "What's this going on over here?" You blank out for a minute and then you're in that other world. It's that lapse of mindfulness that contains all kinds of machinations of the mind, all the changing of the sets, and the changing of the backdrop, so that you can actually create that other world.

So you want to look for that moment of blanking out. The way to do this is to try to fight the tendency to change the frame of reference in which you operate.

Right here the frame of reference is the sensation of the body: the sensations of warmth, motion, coolness, and heaviness, everything that gives you a sense that you're inhabiting a body that has a shape, whatever the sensations that let you know that you have arms and hands and legs and a torso, a head, and feet. Try to focus as much attention as possible on those sensations and keep your attention continuous. You'll begin to see that little tendency to move off. As you learn to look for it, you can learn to say No to it. As you learn to say No to it, you start learning lots of important lessons about the mind.

This is why concentration is the central factor of the Buddha's path: the ability to stay with one topic for long periods of time. It's not to dull you out. The purpose is to get you to see the tendency of the mind that doesn't want to stay with that one topic. Why won't it stay? You're giving it something perfectly good to stay with: the breath coming in, the breath going out. This is the energy of life. You learn how to make it comfortable, so it should feel good to stay here. Yet even then, the mind wants to slip off. Why is that?

If you want to understand the mind, this is where you have to look. Make things as still as possible, and then look for any lack of stillness that may come up. One of the ways of keeping you with the object, keeping you with the breath, is to make it interesting. Remember, there's more to the breath than just in and out. There are many different levels of breath sensations in the body. There's the level of sensations that correspond the in-and-out breath, and then there are other motion sensations in the body as well.

If you look carefully, you can get a sense of where your blood vessels are tensed up and where they're not tense, where they're more relaxed, where the blood is flowing well, where the blood is not flowing well. Once you get a sense of where there's tension and where there's relaxation, you can play with it. Focus on your hands and try to relax your hands as much as possible—all the little joints, the fingers, the muscles of the palms, the muscles along the back of the hands, the muscles in your wrists, up the forearm. Try to keep them as relaxed as possible. See what that does to the sense of energy in the body.

You can try the same with your feet, starting with the toes and coming up, through the feet and then through the ankles. Just try to maintain that sense of relaxation all way through the in-breath, all the way through the out-breath. Try to catch where there's tension building up, say, with the in-breath, or a sense of pushing out with the out-breath. Then see if you can breathe without that tension or without that pushing. See how that affects your sense of inhabiting the body. There's a lot to explore here.

Stay in the world of the body as long as you can. This helps keep you grounded. If you fully inhabit the body, it's very hard to slip off to the past and future. This is why as Ajaan Lee said the state when your awareness fills the body, and the breath gets more and more subtle till it seems to be perfectly still: That's your foundation in concentration practice. That's the foundation of insight.

At least you've got something to keep you grounded. If you get into more formless types of concentration, it's very easy to slither and slip around, because all you have is the perception of space or of knowing to keep you in place. But if you've got the body here and you're fully inhabiting the body, you've got your grounding. The ability to stay with the body, to fully inhabit the body as long as possible, teaches you lots of lessons about the movements of the mind—and the motivations for the movements. Why does the mind want to move off? What do you have to do to keep it interested? At what point can you let go of the adjustment of the breath and just be with the body? And when the mind wants to move, why does it want to move?

You don't have to give in to that impulse to go on to the next thing, or the next thing. You can just stay right here and see what you learn about the mind as you resist that impulse to move on, move on. This is why concentration is the basis for insight. When your gaze gets steady, you can see things more clearly—little tiny movements that you would otherwise miss.

So when you practice meditation, it's not a process of dulling the mind, you're simply putting the mind in a position where it can really see things a lot more clearly. The Buddha himself didn't make any distinction between tranquility practice and insight practice. He says you practice concentration and you develop both qualities: The mind gets more tranquil, more still, and you begin to see things you didn't see before. They go together.

So the part you can will is the part where you just will yourself to stay, stay, stay with this world of the body, not to slip off to other worlds, other frames of reference. The actual insights you're going to get, you can't will. You can will yourself to ask questions, but the actual answers are things you can't will. If you can will the answer, you can be pretty sure you've picked up the answer from someplace else and you're trying to force it on the situation. The real answers are often unexpected.

So the work of the meditation lies in establishing a comfortable foundation for the mind, a comfortable frame of reference that you can maintain. Just keep it going in all kinds of situations. You work here as you're sitting with your eyes closed, with a minimum of distractions, but you also want to be able to maintain that same frame of reference as you go out and deal with other people, as you do

chores around the monastery, as you walk and talk and sit and lie down, stand, whatever your activity is. The more continuous your frame of reference, the more you see.

So work on the part you can will, and the things you can't will, will start appearing.