

## *Protect Your Inner Center*

*September 20, 2012*

You focus on the breath, the feeling of the process of breathing. It's not just a matter of the air coming in and out of the lungs. It's an energy flow in the body—and it has a huge impact on how your mind feels, how you feel in the present moment.

Take some time to look at it. When you breathe in, where do you feel the energy move? Does it feel refreshing as you breathe in? If it doesn't, try to change. Don't breathe out so long maybe, or don't breathe out so short. You may find that the breath is too heavy or too light.

The in-and-out breathing has a huge impact on the other energy flows in the body. So watch for a while to see what feels best and what kind of breathing is easiest to stay focused on.

You bring three qualities to this. One is mindfulness: You remember to stay with the breath. Two, alertness: You watch what's actually happening both in the breath and with the mind, so that you can get a sense of how well they're getting along. And then three, ardency: You really try to do this well.

In other words, you see that the activity of training the mind is something really essential, because the mind, if it's not trained, can create all kinds of suffering for itself. And the suffering doesn't stop there. It goes out and spreads around and creates suffering for other people, too. So you really should devote a lot of time and energy to getting the mind under control. If staying with the breath is going to help, then you want to do it well.

This means that if you notice that the mind has slipped off, you bring it back immediately. You don't have to wait to finish the thought before you come back. Usually a thought, once it's finished, will lead to another thought and then another one.

Learn to drop the thought right in the middle and come back to the breath. When you come back, reward yourself with a really nice breath, one that feels really refreshing. That way, the next time you wander off, you'll be more inclined to come back because you know when you come back it feels good.

While you're with the breath, try to be as sensitive as possible to how the breathing feels. The more sensitive you are, the more subtleties you'll find. And the more subtleties you find, the more interested you'll get: What's actually going on here?

Areas of the body where you've been carrying tension around for who-knows-

how-long: You can begin to loosen them up. You notice all kinds of things about how you relate to the body, and how the mind relates to itself in the present moment.

If you find yourself talking to yourself about the breath, that's fine. That's an integral part of the concentration.

Sometimes we hear that the mind should be totally without any thoughts at all when you meditate. But if you make it totally empty, it's like opening the door to your house and leaving it open. Anything can come in. You've got to keep the mind occupied.

So as long as it has this habit of talking to itself, let it talk to itself about the breath:

How's the breath going right now?

How does it feel?

How about the next breath, how does that one feel?

Could it feel better?

What might you do to make it feel better?

Then once it does feel good, what can you do with that sense of well-being?

What are the dangers of that well-being?

The danger is when the mind gets very narrow in its focus and the breath gets very subtle, you can start drifting off. It's a little bit like falling asleep. The breath gets subtle, the mind relaxes, the body relaxes, and there you go. You don't want to fall asleep, which means you have to be very careful to spread that sense of well-being around in the body.

Give the mind work to do. Think about the breath energy in your legs, in your torso, in your arms, in your head.

Whether you feel any energy flow right now doesn't matter. Just allow yourself to imagine that it can happen. There are all too many things in the world that we don't see because we don't even have the imagination to let ourselves see them.

It's like that ozone hole over the South Pole. For years, the computers were programmed to throw out any information that indicated there was so little ozone. The programmers thought that would be impossible. But then when they really began to notice it, they went back and discovered that actually the satellites had been picking up the information for a long time, yet the computers were programmed to throw it out.

And it's the same with the mind. A lot of things are going on in the body right now, in the mind right now, that don't have room in your imagination, so you don't notice them.

So allow yourself to imagine a little bit that the breath energy does flow

through the legs, it does flow through the arms. It feels nourishing. It flows around the torso, down the spine at the back, through all the different organs in the front, flows in your head, flows around the eyes and relaxes any tension that may be around the eyes. Comes in the ears, in the back of the head down from the top of the head.

Let yourself get interested in this. Because that's part of the pleasure of the meditation. It's not just the pleasant breath energies, but it's also the pleasure of being engaged in doing something you find really interesting.

After all, this is your breath; this is your body. The breath is like free medicine that you haven't taken advantage of. It can soothe the body; it can soothe the mind.

The important thing is that you learn how to stay here consistently. That's what the mindfulness, the alertness, and the ardency are for. The more consistent you are in staying here, the more you're going to see—the more connections you're going to see between things happening in the body and things happening in the mind. Or how causes in the mind have an impact on the body.

For instance, when greed, aversion, or desire arises in the mind, sometimes it arises in a very weak form—so weak that you hardly notice it. But you may notice that something's changed in the breath.

Sometimes you'll notice that the influence goes the other way: Something happens in the breath, there's a tension you're holding in a certain part of the body and it begins to weigh on the mind. You find yourself getting irritable.

There are a lot of interesting things to observe here—and not just while you're meditating. You want to carry these powers of observation into daily life. One of the reasons why we do walking meditation is to get practice in maintaining this sense of a center even as the body moves. You want to keep your sense of the spot in the body that you're most sensitive to, where the breath energy feels good. You want to keep that still even as the body moves, even as you have to watch your environment. As you're sitting right here, you don't have to worry about bumping into anything. But when you're walking, you do have to have at least some knowledge of your environment.

That gives you three things to look after. But basically it's protecting this sense of the awareness of the breath in the body and trying to keep it feeling healthy.

You may not be able at all times to notice whether the breath is coming in or going out, especially as you move from walking meditation into dealing with daily life. So just maintain a sense of at least one spot in the body that's especially sensitive to how the breath energy is flowing in the different parts: a spot in the middle of the chest or down at the tip of the sternum, anyplace where you have a

sense that something's tensed up in the body and it'll register right there. Then you can try to keep that spot relaxed to help prevent tension from spreading in the body.

Try to maintain this sense of the center as the body moves up and down the walking path. As you stop, turn around, walk back in the other direction, protect this center right here. Don't think about where it's going or where it's going to lead you. You just want to protect what you've got right here. Then you can try to carry that center into other activities.

You'll notice that when something happens that gets you upset, there'll be a clamping down on that awareness and you suddenly lose track. Well, try to rediscover it, open it up again. And remind yourself: Next time it comes, don't clamp down again.

This way, you maintain a sense of refreshment and a sense of well-being that you carry into lots of really difficult situations.

You can also bring that same sense of center back to the next meditation session. That's how your practice develops momentum. At the same time, you've got a really good solid place from which you're going to deal with things around you.

In the beginning, it takes a lot of energy to protect this center, but after a while you get more and more used to it. It becomes more and more your center of gravity. Then when events happen, you notice the event but you see it as just going right past you. It's not that you become cold-hearted or don't care about things. It's simply that you learn not to take things personally, not to grab hold of things and pull them in, pull them in. Just let them go past, go past. Then see what needs to be done.

If you're not wounding yourself with the events around you, you're in a much better position to help the people around you.

So this spot is really worth protecting. In the beginning, it's going to be very tender and very weak because you're not used to staying centered like this. But as you get more and more used to the fact that this is a good solid place to stay, you learn how to trust it more, that when you're staying here you're not neglecting things outside.

In fact, you're actually in a better position to see what's really going on outside. Ordinarily, when we're engaged in things outside, there's very little looking at what's actually happening. We're more involved in registering how we feel about things, which may or may not have anything to do with what's actually going on outside. So it's your reactions that you're letting go: the ones that stab the heart. When you let them go, you can keep your heart open and sensitive but also have it

protected.

It's like being a turtle. Turtles have very sensitive bodies, but that's okay because they have good hard shells. You try to have that same sense of a sensitive center but well-protected. You're filling the body with good breath energy. You don't want anybody else's energy to come into your space. That's what you try to carry into the world: a safe center.

When you leave the monastery, it's not that you can take the air of the monastery with you. You can't take the avocado trees, you can't take the scenery around you, but you can take this skill of learning how to protect this sense of center in the body and allow it to feel healthy.

That you can carry with you into the world. And you find that you're much better off because of it.