

Past & Future in the Present

March 26, 2012

Close your eyes and focus on your breath. Notice where you feel the breathing in the body. "Breath," here covers not just the air coming in and out of the lungs, but also the flow of energy that you can feel anywhere on the body. It can go through all your nerves out to the pores of your skin. And the Buddha encourages you to try to be aware of the whole body as you breathe in and as you breathe out. Because the energy that brings the breath in and allows it to go out is connected throughout the body. Sometimes the connections are weak or they're blocked. Ideally everything's working together. So as you're aware of the whole body, try to soothe the whole body. Dissolve any blockages you may feel in the flow of the energy. Smooth out all those connections.

To do this properly, you need to bring three qualities to the meditation. One is mindfulness, which means keeping something in mind. In other words, you're going to remember to stay with the breath. Try not to forget. Then there's alertness, watching what's actually happening in the present moment. Is the breath coming in? Is it going out? How does it feel? Where do you feel it? Finally, there's ardency, which is the quality of trying to do this skillfully: trying to stay with the breath, and if you notice that you've left the breath, coming right back. In other words, you're working with a purpose here. It's important that you not deny that you've got a goal in your meditation. Sometimes we're told we should meditate without any goals, but that's basically being dishonest with ourselves. If we didn't have a goal we wouldn't be here. We'd be down at the beach being heedless. So you want to make sure that your practice is actually in line with the goal and it's heading in that direction: That's ardency.

So even though we're focusing here on the present moment, we're also bringing in the past and the future: mindful of the past and ardent about preparing for the future. The past, of course, is our ability to remember that we want to stay right here. All too often we find ourselves meditating and we come out of a blank period and we wonder, "Where was I just now?" You don't want that in the meditation. You want to be able to remember why you're here, what you're doing, and what you should be doing. You should be focusing on the breath. So that's bringing your memory from the past.

Then there's your intention for the future. As the Buddha said, our experience of the present is something fabricated. There's an intentional element in our experience of the body and our experience of the world around us. And it's aimed at: What's next? What's next? Where is this leading? How can I make sure it's going in a good direction? That's where the quality of ardency comes in. We're trying to move the processes of fabrication in a direction that's going to be skillful, that's going to lead to a happiness that's more than just an ordinary happiness: something that's really deep and really gratifying. That's the long-term goal. The short-term goal is, "I will breathe in alert to what I'm doing. I will breathe out alert to what I'm doing." Those are part of the Buddha's instructions on breath meditation. After you're alert to the breath, get sensitive as to how it feels when it's long, how it feels when it's short. He says that you train yourself. You consciously tell yourself, "I will breathe doing this. I will breathe

doing that. I will breathe sensitive to the whole body. I will breathe trying to calm down the effect of the breath in the body. I'll try to breathe aware of rapture." The word rapture here can mean refreshment: either simply a sense of freshness, or something more intense. You may not be able to decide how intense it's going to be, but you can try to notice where in the body is there a sense of fullness.

One good exercise is to be aware of the sensation of the blood flowing through your hands. Try to relax your hands as much as possible. Then the sense of the blood settling down there will induce a sense of fullness that feels good. Then think of that sense of fullness spreading up the arms. Breathe in a way that doesn't disturb that sense of fullness, in a way that allows it to spread.

Then you can breathe in and out sensitive to ease: a sense of relaxation, a sense of well-being. Where can you find that in the body? There may be parts of the body that are in pain and feel tense, so try to work around those for the time being. Find the parts that seem okay. And give them some attention. All too often our mind goes straight for the uncomfortable parts, and the parts that are actually all right get neglected. So for the time being, remind yourself to look all around things: the sense of space around the pain, or the sense of space around the tension where things are relaxed, where they're not in pain. Be consciously aware of that and let that sense of space spread too.

In other words, you're acting here with intention. You're not just being passively aware of what's happening in the present moment. You're trying to shape the present moment skillfully, and through shaping the present moment, you shape the next moment and the moment after that, at the same time remembering your original intention to stay with the breath.

So even though our primary focus is on the present moment, we're bringing past and future to bear on the present: a clear memory of why we're here, and what we should be doing, what we should be focusing on. And when you find something good, what you do to maintain it. When you find something not so good, how do you work with it? Those are the things you remember.

You also remember your purpose for trying to bring the mind to a state of well-being, a state of stability, clarity, unity, where it can settle down: You'll develop good skills that you can use into the future.

So past present and future are all involved right here. It's learning how to use them skillfully, put them together in a skillful way: that's what we're doing as we meditate.

Try to be mindful of the breath, not simply watching what's happening, but realizing that we're already playing a role in shaping the breath and so we might as well shape it skillfully, shape it with awareness. As the Buddha said, when we shape our experience out of ignorance, we suffer. But if we bring knowledge to the process, we can use the mind's tendency to shape its experience for the purpose of putting an end to suffering. These processes become a path.

That's a lot to keep in mind, but remember: training your ability to keep important things in mind is part of our training, as is keeping in mind our motivation for why we're here. So you're training your memory and your motivation as you develop your alertness all at the same time.