

In Control

December 23, 2014

It's important, as you settle down with the breath, that you try to make it your own—not that you're going to try to force it to do anything that's going to put the body out of balance. Actually, making it your own means first listening to what it needs.

What does the body need? What does the breath need? Does it need you to put a little more energy into it, or does it need you to think of calming it down? The perceptions you use to relate to the breath can have a huge impact on how the breathing goes through the body.

So what can you give to the breath? The need to make this your own relates to the fact that when strong emotions come in, they hijack your breath. When you're angry, you breathe in a certain way; when you're lustful, you breathe in a certain way; when you're afraid, you breathe in a certain way. And those ways tend to aggravate the emotion. You feel more and more irritated, and then the body seems to be sending you signals, saying that you really are angry, you really are greedy or lustful, whatever, even when the mind itself has dropped that particular emotion for a while. But the breath has stirred up some hormones in the body, and if it feels constricted in and of itself, it's going to keep things going for a long time. And then where are you going to go to get away from that emotion?

The same when you're confronted with people outside who are really difficult. They can say things and do things that would get your breath working against you. So you need your own space, you need to be able to reclaim the breath so that you can be in control at least of that spot: the sensation of the breathing coming in, going out—which is why we work at making it comfortable right now.

Right now, it's a good time. We're in a good environment for this. But you want to be able to hold your own even when the environment is not friendly or conducive. That's especially when you need your own space. If you find yourself in your emotion, you need to be able to step back, because you've known from experience that if you give in to your anger or your frustration or whatever, you're going to end up doing things that you later regret.

So you want to be able to step back from the emotion, or at the very least have some spot where you can watch it with a little bit of detachment and have a sense that you're in a safe place. If nothing else, you'll stay here in your safe place until the emotion blows over, like being in a safe little hut during a storm. Or when a helicopter's coming over, you want to be quiet even though the helicopter's

coming. So to withstand the power of the emotions, or at the very least not get swept away by them, you need a place where you can step back and feel a sense of comfort, a sense of security. You've got the breath here on your side. You can remember your sense of what's right and wrong, what skillful and what's not skillful, and with the breath on your side, it's a lot easier to follow through with that.

If the emotion's coming on really strong, you have to gauge whether you can do or say anything at that particular time. Sometimes you have to be very quiet, not only inside, but outside, because you know that if you open your mouth to say anything, it's not going to come out right. So there are times when you just do nothing; other times when in the midst of all the storm you can actually see clearly, "Okay this is the right thing to do, and this is the right time to do it." What this means is that you're in control. You're less likely to get swept away.

It's the same with dealing with people outside. As we're living here at the monastery, we don't have too many tasks, so we can focus our attention on each task as we're doing it as a way of developing our mindfulness and alertness. But in the outside world often you have so many tasks that you have to decide which ones are worth doing well and which ones are worth doing just enough to get by. You have to have your priorities really clear: What's really important to you in life? Where do you want to be in the next five, ten, fifteen years? Which things are you doing right now that will help you get there, and which things are superfluous? You want to be able to maintain that sense of your priorities.

Now, other people have their priorities, and they'll want to push you to follow their priorities. They'll say things and do things that can push your buttons, but you've got to have a place inside where the buttons are not pushed. Just because something is pressing doesn't mean you should come to the conclusion that it's important. A lot of things are pressing, but they're not important. It's just that people are pushing, that's all.

So again, you need your space inside where you have a sense of being in control, so that you can remember your priorities and see them through. We hear so much about how the body and the mind are beyond our control, and ultimately of course they are. Your body's going to die whether you want it to or not. It doesn't ask permission. It's going to age; it certainly doesn't ask permission for that, and there are times when it's going to get sick, and it doesn't ask permission for that, either.

We depend on its being a certain way, but it's not always going to be that way — but that doesn't mean we don't have any control at all. We can decide to practice or not practice, we can make the breath comfortable; we can make it

uncomfortable. We can choose which of our emotions we're going to follow along with and which ones we're not. So you want to be able to take advantage of these abilities we have, so that you can develop a path for yourself. In other words, the breath becomes your path to the end of suffering, the body becomes part of your path to the end of suffering, your thoughts all become devoted to the end of suffering. You can make that choice and you don't want anybody else to come and unmake it. You don't want any random emotions or old habits to come and unmake it, either.

So you start with the breath, reclaim your breath; make it yours, make it a place that gives you strength, gives you a sense of nourishment, so that you don't lose your sense of direction.

There are lots of people out there, lots of voices; the media get more and more invasive all the time. They talk about implanting Internet devices in your body, and where will you go then to get away? You have to learn how to push back. Aging and illness and death are pushing in one direction, but you want to push back, make something out of what you've got here before you have to give those things away, because what you gain from the practice is something that they can't touch—if you really devote yourself to it.

So make sure that your compass is pointed in the right direction, and you've got the strength to follow that direction. Being with the breath, making the breath your own is what helps put you in charge. You're in control at least to the extent of learning how to get beyond the suffering that you ordinarily would succumb to, that you ordinarily would create for yourself, because this is what it comes down to: The suffering that really weighs down on the mind isn't what comes from outside, it's what comes from within-side. It comes from within you. So learn how to take claim of at least this part of what's in you, so that the mind can have a safe place, a position of strength, where you can be in control.