Mindfulness of Breathing

Guy Armstrong · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Guy Armstrong · 58:22

Good evening.

I'm happy to see that you're all still here, because the first days of retreat, especially long retreat, are not easy ones. There's the unfamiliarity with the long sittings and walking slowly and the withdrawal from all our daily activities and contacts. It's not an easy transition often. I often think it takes me about three to five days to really get into the rhythm of a long retreat. So you've made a good beginning. Happy to have you still awake.

What I'd like to talk about tonight is mindfulness of breathing. I'd like to talk about it because I think probably a number of you are doing this practice now. I also want to talk about it because I have a lot of affection for this practice. It's an important practice in the whole history of Buddhism and the Buddhist teachings.

There are three main meditative schools of Buddhism alive in the world today and transitioning to the West. Roughly speaking, our tradition, which is often called Theravada, but we've recently started calling it early Buddhism for reasons that are too obscure to go into. But it's on the website, actually, if you get curious why we decided to make that change in name.

So early Buddhism relates to the very earliest teachings of the historical Buddha. Tibetan, which came out of northern India some centuries after the historical Buddha, and then got preserved in Tibet and the Himalayas. And Zen, which grew out of Chan in China, shares a lot of thinking and practices with Chan. So Zen and Chan I kind of put together as the third major meditative tradition.

What's interesting is mindfulness of breathing is a central practice in all three of these main lineages. It's the only meditation practice I know of that is central or even practiced by all three of the schools. So that's some indication of how important it's been in the history of Buddhism and continues to be until this day.

In our tradition of early Buddhism, there are two main discourses of the Buddha that really pertain to this practice. One of them you've probably heard of—it's called the Four Foundations of Mindfulness Discourse. In the Pali language, that's called the Satipatthana Sutta. The other one is the Discourse on the Mindfulness of Breathing, or the Anapanasati Sutta in Pali.

One of the interesting things about teaching at the three-month course is that people are here with such a range of practice backgrounds. We have people here who have been practicing for forty years or more. We have people who have been practicing for one or two years. We love having all the ends of that spectrum and everyone in between. Because with more veteran practitioners, we get to talk about some

things that pertain to their practice. With newer practitioners, it's really exciting to see the way the teachings illuminate your experience and how the understandings dawn, often for the first time in certain areas. So it's wonderful to have both.

But as a teacher, it's hard to speak to both at the same time. So in my talks, I'm sometimes going to say things that will be more suited for people who've been doing this for a while and may seem esoteric or not very interesting to people who are newer. Other times I will say things for newer people that may seem boring or repetitive for people who've been around for a while. But please be patient and recognize that you're a broad group. So we try to hit a little bit of something for everyone.

One of the things I wanted to talk about tonight, especially for those who are not so old in this particular school or practice, is just a little bit of history. Both the discourses I mentioned of the Buddha are collected in a volume that in the Pali is called the Majjhima Nikaya. It's a collection of 152 discourses, originally in the Pali language, and they've been translated into English in a very good translation by Bhikkhu Bodhi.

These teachings are about 2,500 years old. The fact that we have them in readable English today, to me, is an amazing adventure story. It's like something out of Raiders of the Lost Ark. Indiana Jones would feel right at home in a story like this because the texts were preserved orally for centuries. Then they were written down by celibate acolytes on a tropical island and preserved against weather and corruption and all kinds of things for more and more centuries. They got lost in India. Virtually all the teachings of the Buddha got lost in India around the 11th century because of invasions.

Different translations are still available in Tibet, translations from Sanskrit. But our tradition rests on the Pali versions of these texts, which go back to the time of the Buddha. Pali is an ancient Indian language that nobody speaks today. It was kind of interesting—in 1956 there was a gathering of a lot of Buddhist monastics that was called something like the Fifth World Council. They were from all different kinds of countries and they didn't know each other's languages so they spoke together in Pali. It was very sweet because it's the only language that they all knew—all these monks and nuns from around the world talking in Pali, which basically nobody speaks today.

The texts of the Buddha's discourses that were recorded in Pali amount to about twenty volumes in that language. This book, which is quite thick in English, was three of those volumes in the original Pali. So altogether they comprise probably 2,000 pages.

When feeling an unpleasant feeling, one understands, "I feel an unpleasant feeling." When feeling a feeling that is neither pleasant nor unpleasant, one understands, "I feel a feeling that is neither pleasant nor unpleasant."

Third foundation, mental states. Here, when the mind has lust, one understands, "The mind has lust." When the mind is without lust, one understands, "The mind is without lust." When the mind has hatred, one understands, "The mind has hatred." When the mind is without hatred, one understands, "The mind is

without hatred."

Fourth foundation, dhammas. Here one understands, "There is sensual desire in me," or one understands, "There is no sensual desire in me."

Do you notice something about all these instructions? What's the common thread running through them?

It's simply knowing what's happening while it's happening. That's mindfulness. Not changing anything, not judging anything, not trying to make it different—just knowing. Breathing long and knowing you're breathing long. Feeling angry and knowing you're feeling angry. Having desire arise and knowing desire is present.

This is quite revolutionary, actually, when you think about it. Most of us spend most of our time either lost in what's happening or trying to change what's happening. But the Buddha is pointing to something much simpler: just know what's happening.

Jon Kabat-Zinn's definition, which has become quite popular, is "paying attention in a particular way—on purpose, in the present moment, and non-judgmentally." I think that's a pretty good contemporary way of putting it. But the essence is right there in these ancient texts: knowing what's happening while it's happening.

Now, you might think, "Well, that sounds easy enough." But if you've ever tried to meditate, you know it's not so simple. The mind has this amazing capacity to be somewhere else entirely. We can be sitting here listening to the breath, and suddenly we're planning tomorrow's grocery list or replaying yesterday's conversation. That's just how minds work.

So mindfulness practice is really about developing this capacity to stay present with immediate experience. And it turns out this is a skill we can cultivate. Like learning to play the piano or ride a bicycle, it takes practice, but it's definitely possible.

The Buddha was quite systematic about this training. He didn't just say, "Go be mindful." He gave very specific instructions about where to place attention and how to work with it. And breathing was his starting place.

When feeling an unpleasant feeling, one knows, I feel an unpleasant feeling.

The third foundation, which is the meditation on mind, mind states: here one understands, one knows mind affected by lust as mind affected by lust. And mind unaffected by lust as mind unaffected by lust. One knows mind affected by hate as mind affected by hate. And one knows mind unaffected by hate as mind unaffected by hate.

Here's the fourth foundation: There being sense desire in one, one knows there is sense desire in me. There not being sense desire in one, one knows there is not sense desire in me.

These examples span all four foundations where mindfulness is being described. What word stands out to you here? "One knows." That phrase appears again and again and again. In the Buddha's most basic description of mindfulness, the phrase is simply "one knows." Breathing in long, one knows. Breathing in short, one knows. Feeling a pleasant feeling, one knows, and so on. One knows what is happening to one.

I would like to suggest this as a really good working definition of mindfulness. There are many ways you could expand on this. If you read definitions on the internet, people can get very flowery—that it has to be based in total acceptance, and it has to be non-judgmental, or the mind has to be completely free of greed, aversion, and delusion for it to be a true moment of mindfulness. But when the Buddha described it, he simply said, "one knows." One knows what is happening to one.

This word "knows" is interesting. In Pali, the word is *pajanati*, closely related to *sampajanya*, which is usually translated as clear comprehension. In one translation, the translator uses "understands" in place of "knows." This is intriguing. "Know" and "understand" are similar, but they're a little different, aren't they? Clear comprehension has this flavor of understanding, of comprehension.

So this word *pajanati*, which is really the key operational word describing mindfulness, has within it an element of understanding, which to me suggests there's some intelligence there, some wisdom. I understand mindfulness as the doorway for wisdom to arise in us. It has this basic component of wisdom through the understanding of what's going on.

In the simplest description, mindfulness is knowing what's happening for us. Draw it out slightly and it becomes: one clearly understands what's happening for us. Whichever you prefer.

This has enormous significance to me. I'm not just playing with words here, because mindfulness is our path. That is the path of this meditation we'll be doing. And what it comes down to, described this way, is really simple.

If you ever get off track in your meditation, or you get confused or uncertain—What do I do? How do I get back? I've lost the thread. I've got to start again. What do I do?—know what's happening to you. Breathing in, breathing out, unpleasant feeling, confusion, aversion. You could notice any of those things that are part of the experience, and you would be starting on track again.

That's how we renew our practice in any situation. It answers the question: What's happening now? That's all you have to do. And from that, the whole path unfolds. So it's really simple. Don't make it complicated.

Know what's happening to you now. And here's the hard part: do that moment after moment after moment. Joseph Goldstein likes to say, "It's easy to be mindful. It's hard to remember to be mindful." So it's simple—just know what's happening and then keep doing that in every new moment. And then the path will unfold.

And it's very powerful. Again, in this discourse on the foundations of mindfulness, this is what the Buddha

said about the power of this: "This is the direct path for the purification of beings, for the surmounting of sorrow, for the disappearance of pain and grief, for the attainment of the true way, for the realization of nibbana"—that means liberation or awakening—"namely the four foundations of mindfulness."

So this simple act of knowing what our experience is leads all the way to the end of suffering and the fullest awakening. I find that really inspiring because it's so available and so simple.

How does it do that? Well, one thing to think about is what's the alternative. I like this cartoon from the New Yorker. It showed somebody at work, sitting at a desk and working on the computer—a task we can probably all relate to. But there was a thought bubble above the person's head, and the thought bubble was of being out on a golf course, swinging a club. So imagine that you're at work and you'd rather be out playing somewhere.

The second panel of the cartoon was the same person out on the golf course swinging the club, but the thought bubble was of being at home making love to his partner in bed. We can probably relate to that part too. The third panel was the person at home making love to their partner in bed, and the thought bubble was of being in front of their computer at work.

This is all too representative, isn't it, of the distracted mind? Wherever we are, we're thinking about something else. This is not the mind that has really come together in the present moment. So there's always this undercurrent in a life like that, in moments like that which we all know—this undercurrent of not full satisfaction, not complete fulfillment, but a wanting something other.

So I want to suggest that this is a potent image, this kind of cartoon image, and invite you to investigate: when you're not with your anchor for right now, when you're not with your focus in the present moment, where are you? What's happening? When you're not in the present moment, where is your attention?

We often say we get lost in the past or the future. We're planning or we're remembering or we're analyzing or we're conversing or we're comparing or we're in some kind of fantasy. Take a look and see if that's accurate. When you come back from these excursions, thoughts and images, where were you? What were you doing? What were you involved with?

Sometimes we call these distractions. But you know, if we're honest, these are not emotionally neutral activities. We go off into regrets about the past. We go off into worries about the future. We go into judging ourselves for something we didn't do quite skillfully. We go off into resentment of other people who we feel weren't fair to us. We find longings and wants for something that isn't here. These are the things that stir us up.

So in your meditation, when you come back to the present moment after a thought excursion, take a look at your mood and your state of mind. Did that thought excursion help bring calm and peace and settledness? Or did it stir things up more?

Generally, these thought excursions are into the realm of seductive thoughts and emotions. And what seduces us is hope and fear, pleasure and pain. So we return from these excursions a little more stirred up than when we entered them. Check it out. Take a look in your meditation and see if it's somewhat like that.

When we give a lot of attention to these thoughts, especially charged thoughts around past and future, we end up getting more stressed. We end up getting a little bit disturbed and we lose any sense of calm we may have had. Then we come back to the present moment, we pay attention for a while, a little bit more calm comes back in. Next excursion, some thoughts come along and we become stirred up.

So what the Buddha said about giving our attention to these kinds of thoughts that basically stir us up and revolve around hope and fear is that it's a form of unwise attention. We're giving our attention to things that don't end up making us happy.

And we tend to do this a lot with our thinking. The thinking stirs up emotions that don't make us happy. Then take a look at how it feels when you're able to sustain your attention in the present moment for a while—notice if it doesn't bring about some kind of settling of the energy, of the disturbing thoughts, of the hope and fear. And this is what the Buddha said is wise attention.

Wise attention is giving time to things that lead to our happiness and our growth, things that lead to our deepening in the Dhamma. This is wise attention. And of course, the present moment is the foremost of those. In our style of meditation, mostly where we want to give our wise attention is to the present moment. It's also helpful to engage in Dharma reflection—we'll talk about that probably later in some moderation—but particularly paying attention to the present moment, knowing what you're experiencing. That's our path. That's the way we grow in the Dhamma.

So the first benefit of mindfulness is we're not running off into distracting emotions that stir up the mind. And then the second thing is that as we settle more in the present moment, a lot of wholesome qualities come out of that.

As I mentioned within the Satipatthana discourse, the first foundation is that of the body. And the Buddha talked a lot about mindfulness of the body. So I want to talk about that generally for a bit. He spoke in praise of mindfulness of the body over and over. There's one section in one of these texts—the numerical discourses, the Anguttara Nikaya—where there are fifty discourses in a row on the benefits of mindfulness of the body. Fifty in a row. And here's one of the quotes:

"When one thing is developed and cultivated, the body becomes tranquil, the mind becomes tranquil, extraneous thoughts subside, and all wholesome qualities that pertain to wisdom reach fulfillment. What is that one thing? Mindfulness directed to the body."

I find this really interesting because ultimately meditation is all about the mind. The heart of meditation is about the mind because suffering and the end of suffering really are in the mind. The source of suffering,

as you know from the Second Noble Truth, is craving. And that's a mental activity. The five hindrances are states of mind. The four right efforts are about states of mind. So are the seven factors of enlightenment and the five spiritual faculties. The heart of the Buddha's teaching is around states of mind. And yet, mindfulness of the body is the foundation for us. Why is that? Why did the Buddha emphasize it so much?

There are a few reasons. One is that it's always available. The body is always with us, whether we want it to be or not. It's always here. So this practice is always available. It's not like you're practicing with bliss or rapture, which come and go—you're practicing with something you already have. It's already there.

The other thing that's really helpful is that the reality of the body is fairly firm compared to the reality of the mind. The Buddha said that if you're going to identify with anything—meaning make an "I" out of anything, claim anything, like "I am the body" or "this is my body," or "I am the mind" or "this is my mind"—he said it's better to identify with the body than with the mind. Why? Because the mind changes so quickly. Whatever you identify with could be gone in an instant, but the body is here. It changes too, but a lot more slowly.

So there's this kind of firm reality, and you feel that as you sit. The body has a very grounding quality because a lot of it is the earth element. You can feel yourself settle into it and let it rest on the earth and feel the firmness and solidity of it. The more you get in touch with that, the more that stability transfers to the mind. As you ground the attention in the body, the mind picks up by osmosis that stability. And you start to realize that you can sit here for forty-five minutes in the hall and the body is quite still, and the mind may have gone through a roller coaster of waves, but the body has just been there stable. And the more you connect with that, the more you understand—oh, these waves are going to come and go.

And in the end, they don't last all that long. But the body is here, and I can rest in it. To some extent, I can trust in it a little more.

One of my teachers in Thailand, Ajahn Buddhadasa, gave this advice to his students: "Don't do anything that takes you out of the body." Contrast this with our life as Westerners, with this famous line from James Joyce in Ulysses, said of a character, "Mr. Duffy always lived a short distance from his body." You may know people like that—not quite at home.

Now in meditation, sometimes the body is not so difficult to come back into. If there's been trauma earlier in life, the body may not be an inviting or comfortable place to be. And so work with your practice teachers to figure out how to navigate that. Eventually you want to start coming back into the body, but to do it in a measured way that's not overwhelming when there's perhaps a trauma history there.

So the body sits and manifests a lot of equanimity through all the changing waves of thoughts and emotions. As we tune into it, we pick up some of that equanimity. But also the body reflects the mind—really honestly and really accurately. If there's a strong emotion going on in the mind, you'll feel it in the body. There's this great book title: "The Body Doesn't Lie." And it doesn't. The body will reflect

whatever's going on in the mind.

If there's tension in the body that you identify as habitual, long-term tension, or you feel it arising spontaneously in the moment, it's important to listen to that because often it's an indicator of something that's gone on in the mind. Once the mind becomes calm, the body starts to calm. When the mind gets agitated, the body usually reflects that. So we can learn a lot about our emotions by tuning in to what's going on in the body. And if we don't move away, it will keep bringing us back in touch with what's happening emotionally.

So that's mindfulness of the body. Within mindfulness of the body is mindfulness of breathing. It's one of the experiences that we find within the body—the experience of the breath going out and the breath coming in.

About this, from the Discourse on Mindfulness of Breathing, the Buddha said, "When mindfulness of breathing is developed and cultivated, it is of great fruit and great benefit. It leads directly to true wisdom and deliverance." So this practice can be a single path that one follows for years in one's practice career.

In fact, after the Buddha was awakened and began teaching, he still went back into retreat. I find this really interesting. His mind was already free. He had no more suffering. He had no more unwholesome mind states. And he would still go back into retreat for three months at a time. After one of these retreats, he said, "During my retreat I practiced mindfulness of breathing." And this is a quote: "If anyone could say of anything that it is a noble dwelling, a divine dwelling, the Buddha's dwelling, it is of concentration by mindfulness of breathing that one would rightly say this." He spoke highly of this even after his awakening.

So why is it so helpful? Why is it such a central practice in our tradition?

One of the really nice things is breathing happens by itself. It's part of the semi-autonomous nervous system, and even if you don't pay attention to it, it's going to keep going. So that means we don't have to do anything to breathe, and that's one thing we can let go of and start to relax into. The breath's going to happen. It's going to go by itself. Just relax and feel it. You don't have to do anything to breathe.

And like the body, it's always there. We hope it's always there. If it's not, call me or Karin. So it's reliable. It's always present. It's basically neutral. Breathing is generally a neutral experience unless you've had some history where it's been troubling.

But although it's neutral, it has great potential for pleasure. Because as the disturbing thoughts start to settle down, that relaxation in the body, that tranquility, is felt as a pleasant thing.

Finding pleasure in your meditation is really, really helpful. Not only will it bring you back to the meditation cushion more often, but the experience of pleasure inwardly is that we relax more. And that relaxation leads to a collectedness of mind called concentration that's very helpful for insight as well.

Sometimes tune into the rhythm of your breath. Let it be natural. You don't need to control it. But tune into the rhythm. When you can relax and let it just go on its own, there's something really soothing about the rhythm of breathing. I don't know if this is true, but it may even take us back to the time as an infant when we were cradled on our mother's chest and feeling that coming and going, a rising and falling, inhale and exhale of our mother's breath. But our own breath can kind of cradle us and rock us in the same way. It's very calming and soothing when you can relax into that.

You want to let the rhythm be natural in order for that to happen. You have to let go of trying to control it. That's not easy in the beginning. As soon as we start to pay attention to the breath, we have a tendency to want to direct it—okay, now breathe in, now breathe out, now breathe in, now breathe out. That's okay. A little bit of control, even though it's not recommended, will often happen in the beginning. As you relax more, that little bit of control will go away, and then the relaxation becomes stronger.

Another great thing about the breath is it has a wonderful way to balance the energy. It's interesting to look at the difference, feel the difference between breathing in and breathing out. They have very different effects in the body. Breathing in is energizing. The word in Pali is *pana*. That's why it's the *anapa na* discourse—in-breathing and out-breathing. So *pana* is breathing, is breath. The Sanskrit for it you're probably more familiar with is *prana*. And so *prana* in the yogic tradition has connotations of life, vitality, and energy. It originally just meant breath. In yogic practices they use the breath a lot to control the energies of the body. In our meditations we don't use it to control in that way. We just let it be natural.

But you will notice that breathing in has an energizing aspect. You can feel it in many parts of the body. It's kind of an uplift in that way. And then breathing out has a relaxation quality. You can tune into that and kind of encourage the relaxation with the out-breath. You might think on the out-breath that you're letting go. And the breath just goes out into space. And as you kind of feel that out-breath going out into space, you might feel your own mind kind of emptying. You feel that connection to space and it opens up space in your own mind. So you can start to tune in to the energizing aspect of the in-breath, the relaxing aspect of the out-breath.

The other strength of this meditation is that—and this applies to any of the anchors—when you're clear that for a period of time you're choosing to focus on body or sounds or breath, then it really becomes clear when you're not there. So it highlights the times that we go away. Those stand out by contrast. You're with the anchor for a while, for a while, for a while, then you're not with it. That means you're off somewhere else. And then you kind of wake up—oh, I haven't been with the anchor. Oh, where was I? Oh, thinking, imaging, something like that. So it highlights those times of excursion, makes it clear.

And then check—oh, how am I feeling after that excursion? Oh, stirred up a bit. If we practice with open attention where mindfulness of thoughts and images is part of the practice, part of the territory, honestly it's easier to be a little lost in those without recognizing that we're lost. That's my experience anyway.

Meditation on breath is an elemental kind of meditation. We're meditating on the wind element. There are

four classical physical elements that we experience in meditation. The wind element is one of them. What's nice about connecting with these elemental qualities—the others are earth, water, fire, or heat—is that it connects us to nature. We feel the air coming into our body, and it's a lot like the wind that's rustling the leaves on the trees outside when there's a breeze.

It also brings up this interesting question about self and not-self. When the air's out there, we don't think of it as us, right? When you breathe it in, at what point does it become you? Is it when it first enters your nostril? Or is it when it goes into the lungs and binds with the blood? And at what point is it no longer you? When it leaves the lungs or when it leaves the nostrils? There's this transition. We're always going back and forth with nature. Bringing nature in and it becomes part of what we consider us. And breathing out and it becomes part of what we no longer consider us. It's back to nature. That's an interesting exploration.

The Buddha also said that practicing mindfulness of breathing, even though it's in the first foundation of mindfulness, fulfills all the other three. In the second foundation of feeling tone, one of the instructions in the Discourse on Mindfulness of Breathing is breathing in and experiencing pleasure, breathing out and experiencing pleasure. So there's the feeling tone. In the third foundation, breathing in, gladdening the mind, breathing out, gladdening the mind. The breath is directly affecting our mind state. And the fourth foundation: breathing in, contemplating impermanence; breathing out, contemplating impermanence. This is opening up to dhammas or wisdom, dharmic principles, understanding what's going on. This is mindfulness of breathing as a whole.

It's interesting that in this discourse, the Buddha doesn't tell us exactly where to pay attention to the breath. Over the years, people have developed practical approaches. Inside the nose is fine—breath in the nostrils. Just below the nose on the upper lip is fine. Chest rising and falling is fine. Belly rising and falling is fine. Feeling the breath in the whole body is fine. Sometimes people like to track the breath coming in through the nostrils, going down, expanding the chest, expanding the belly, and on the out-breath reversing—tracking the course of the breath as it comes in and out. That's also fine. Anything that feels accessible for you is fine.

As I mentioned this morning, there are some obstacles or difficulties that people often experience taking breath as a focus and why it may not work for everyone. There could have been a past difficulty from asthma or some injury that has conditioned the relationship to breathing and made it not comfortable or easy. And then there are particular hindrances that come up.

One is striving. Striving is basically the desire force that is taking root in the meditative realm or the realm of meditative experience. As an example, we're settling in, a few days into the retreat. We start to feel some periods of calm, maybe even a whole sitting where there's a lot of calm. And then the next sitting, we want that again. We want to re-experience that delightful feeling of calm. To get it back, we may lean on the breath harder with an extra amount of effort that's kind of tense because we want a result. The calm

comes when we're just able to be with the breath out of the innocent motive of interest—interest in wise attention. Then the mind relaxes and settles. But if we're approaching the breath in order to get somewhere else, the motive is not pure anymore and tension comes in. We're looking for result and not just to know what's happening.

So what do you do when that happens? I've come across this a lot. One of the places I came across it really clearly was when I went to Burma some years ago. I ordained as a monk just for a short period of time because I wanted to practice with a great Burmese master named Pauk Sayadaw. He's in his eighties now, and he's recognized as one of the great masters still living in our tradition in both concentration and insight practices. I went to him specifically because I wanted to practice mindfulness of breathing to develop stronger concentration.

In his traditional style, I would see him regularly for interviews. He was the abbot of a very large monastery. When I went there, there were 750 people practicing in his monastery—600 monastics, both male and female, and 150 lay practitioners. So there were many people there, some of them very accomplished meditators.

Knowing I was a teacher back in the West, he gave me an interview every day. I'd go to his kuti and meet him outside on his deck. It was a very public affair—we'd all line up and wait for our chance to report on our experience to Sayadaw, then he'd give us advice. We'd hear each other's interviews, which was quite humbling.

One day I remember there was a young Burmese monk ahead of me. I'd been practicing for many years at that point, and this young monk couldn't have been practicing for very long. His report was, "Oh, Sayadaw, I sat for three hours yesterday in the third jhana in the meditation hall." That's a very advanced state of concentration, especially in his system. So it was humbling to hear those reports.

Then I'd give my little report: "Oh, Sayadaw, I'm having hindrances," or whatever I was working on at that point.

What I was reporting on one time was, "Oh, I'm striving. I find I'm striving in my meditation because I go through periods of calm and then I want to re-experience them." I asked for his advice. He just looked at me and said, "Don't do that."

Often his advice was very pithy. When I asked him about the hindrances, he said, "If you have aversion, do metta. If you're sleepy, pull your earlobes." This actually works pretty well—try it sometime when you're sleepy. Yank on your earlobes and it does tend to wake you up. So that was his advice for the hindrances, and on striving it was simply "don't do it."

But if you find yourself striving, you might feel it first as a tension in the body—the body's kind of tight like you're leaning forward, thinking "next moment, not this moment." Recognize it through that sensation and then see what might need to be let go of. Sometimes it's helpful to drop that practice and open to

sounds. Just let go of the focus on the breath and open to sounds, because it's a very spacious and relaxing focus.

Another possible problem is aversion to thoughts. We start finding our way into these calm places and begin thinking, "Oh, I get it—thoughts are the problem. If I could just stop thinking, it would all be okay." This is a misguided observation. Thoughts aren't the problem, and our practice is not about stopping thinking. If you think that, you'll tie yourself up in knots, because there's no way we can stop our thinking by any effort of will. If we try to stop thinking through willful effort, it results in a big contraction. That tension is not conducive to relaxation and ease, which are the wellsprings of concentration.

The problem is not recognizing thoughts. If we recognize a thought upon arising—not a problem. It's recognized and then it usually dissolves.

It's the not recognizing thoughts that leads us into being seduced, carrying us far down the road with that thought train. This is what stirs us up. We give away our basic peace by going on these thought train excursions.

Part of wisdom is recognizing that this isn't wise attention and learning to reframe. We cannot stop thinking, but we can develop more and more choice about not following the train tracks of those thoughts. The thought arises—fine for it to be there—but I choose not to pursue it. This becomes the skillful choice point.

Joseph Goldstein offers wonderful guidance for meditation: "Nothing is worth thinking about." This is excellent advice. Whatever kinds of thoughts arise—even those that seem like the most brilliant creative urges you've ever experienced—simply say "not now" and return to the present moment. You can do this right in the middle of meditation: "Not now," and back to the breath.

This practice leads us to trust the still heart and mind as the most reliable source of creative response to life. Whatever personal problems we might feel inclined to work on, we will not solve them through thinking. The response must come from a different place—from the deep settledness, stillness, and openness that meditation cultivates. From that space, truly new approaches, ideas, and solutions can simply arise. Trust this more than thinking through problems. It works better.

The last hindrance I want to address is judgment. We often hold some concept that we should be present with every breath, every sound, every moment of bodily experience. This becomes particularly highlighted with the breath because breaths are so discrete and clear. When we are not present with the breath for a while, we think we have failed. We become very judgmental: "Oh, I've been away in thought for so long. I'm really a terrible meditator, and I'm never going to learn how to do this." Then the thoughts spiral downward: "I should not have missed that whole stretch."

We believe we should be present with more breaths than we actually are, and away for less time than we actually were. Let me ask: what is the right number of breaths to be with in a sitting that would qualify

you as a good meditator? Do you know the answer? Has anyone ever told you? Yet we judge ourselves for not meeting some fictitious standard.

Simply release the idea that there is any standard about this. You are making your best effort. Accept what comes. There will be excursions. Has anyone ever told you the right length of time to be away in a thought excursion? No. The right length of time for you right now is exactly the time you were away.

Did you pull yourself back by an act of will? No. There are simply these spontaneous moments of return to the present moment. How wonderful! Our past practice habits make such returns more likely, but the process itself is beyond our control.

Take your actual experience as your standard. This is the way things are right now. I am making my best effort. This is what is happening. That is my standard, and it is perfectly fine. Watch out for judgment—it can be truly crippling.

Looking at the trajectory of this practice, the meditation does work.

One comes more and more to abide in the present moment. The thought excursions do lessen. And as that happens, the mind becomes more peaceful and the body becomes more peaceful. The center of gravity of our being starts to shift.

When I came into meditation, my center of gravity was in the thought world. That's where I lived almost all my waking hours. I almost always had some thought running through my mind, and that's where I hung out. That was my center of gravity.

As time went by and I could see thought as just another arising in the field of awareness, my center of gravity started to shift to the empty space—the empty space that's created by mindfulness. Then thoughts were just blips in that empty space.

So this happens. We dwell more and more in that wide openness that has tremendous wisdom potential. Ajahn Sumedho likes to call that space intuitive awareness. It's from this open, receptive, still place that the deepest insights and creative responses to life arise—the insights that eventually liberate us. We learn to trust the insights and understandings that emerge from that kind of silent space.

I love this quote from Albert Einstein: "The intuitive mind is a sacred gift, and the rational mind is a faithful servant. We have created a society that honors the servant and has forgotten the gift." So we're here to rediscover that gift. Meditation returns that gift to us in its proper perspective.

I'll close with this quote from the Buddha: "Mindfulness of breathing is peaceful and sublime. It is an abiding in happiness that breaks up and calms unwholesome mental states whenever they arise."

Let's have a few moments of silence to allow the words to settle before we move into walking. We'll just sit for a minute together in silence.

"This is the direct path for the purification of beings, for the overcoming of sorrow and lamentation, for the disappearance of pain and grief, for the attainment of the true way, for the realization of nibbāna—namely the four foundations of mindfulness."

We have about thirty minutes now for walking, and then there will be the last sitting of the day with chanting at nine. Don't be afraid to come—Annie promised the sitting will end at 9:20. It's wonderful to learn a new chant, so please do return.

Thank you for listening.

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