

The Walls of Ignorance

Thanissaro Bhikkhu

January 29, 2004

Try to be alert to the breath: what it's doing right now and what *you're* doing with it right now. Sometimes you may notice that you're putting too little or too much pressure on it. "Too little" means that the mind keeps slipping off. "Too much" means that the breath feels confined. It's constricted, placed in a box, and can't get out.

Ajaan Lee once compared alertness to a rope over a pulley that you can pull in two directions. You pull it toward the breath to see what the breath is doing, then you pull it back to the mind to see how the mind is relating to the breath, to see that things are going well, that things are working. If they're not, you can make adjustments: Pull back a little on the pressure you're placing on the breath, change the breath, change your focal point.

Or you can think of the breath in other ways. If you find that the way you breathe is building up tension in the neck, think of the breath coming in from the back of the neck to reverse that process. See what that does. Tell yourself that everything you experience in the body right now is an aspect of breath energy. When you look at the body in that way, you can gauge whether the sensations you feel are breath energy flowing smoothly or breath energy that's constricted or blocked. Then make adjustments so that everything can open up and flow.

This simple exercise of being very clear about what you're doing and checking the results of what you're doing is basic to the whole practice. It's how you develop sensitivity. It's how you break down barriers in the mind. Often we're sensitive to what we're doing but not to the results, or we notice the results but not what we're doing to cause them. This applies to all areas of our lives.

Sometimes our ignorance is simply a matter of not pointing our attention in the right direction. Other times it's more willful. There are certain things we don't want to see, and so we erect firewalls in our minds. We put up stage sets to hide from ourselves. Part of us knows that we're doing this, and yet part of the mind's agreement is to pretend that we don't. This way we block off unpleasant things, most of which are things we've done in the past that caused harm. Especially when they were things we *knew* would cause harm but we went ahead and did them anyway: That's where we try to block things thoroughly. If this is a habit with us, those firewalls get thicker and thicker, and our willful ignorance becomes a bigger and bigger problem in our minds.

We tend to think of ignorance, or *avijja*, in very abstract terms – not knowing the four noble truths, not knowing dependent co-arising, not knowing the Deathless – but you can't chip away at those forms of ignorance until you've

chipped away at the more blatant, immediate ones: the mind's habit of disassociating, of leaving gaps in its inner conversation. Say you decide to do something unskillful. If you had a sense of the Buddha watching over your shoulder all the time, it would be harder to do it, so you erect a barrier in the mind as if there were no Buddha in the world, never had been a Buddha, no arahant disciples. Then all kinds of unskillful actions are possible in the world remaining in your mind. But those walls can't stay forever. They have to come down. And then you expend a lot of energy into putting them back up again.

We develop alertness in the meditation for the purpose of drilling through those walls, tearing them down, letting them collapse. Then, when they're down and we can really see, we use equanimity to gauge for ourselves where we actually have been skillful and where we haven't. That way we can learn from our mistakes. As the Buddha once said, "One of the signs of wisdom is in seeing your own foolishness." At least that's the beginning of your quest for knowledge, your quest to overcome ignorance. And the foolishness here is not that you don't know a particular Buddhist teaching; it's simply that you aren't sensitive to what you're doing or to the results of what you're doing. We have the power to shape our experience and yet for the most part we use it in ways that cause unnecessary suffering. This, according to the Buddha, is the biggest danger in our lives: not what other people may do to us, but what we can do through our actions to ourselves.

This is why he focuses the Four Noble Truths on the suffering that comes from craving and ignorance. There's a natural stress in the fact that things change, but our real problem is that we create extra suffering through our craving and ignorance. As long as we have the habit of putting up walls in the mind, we're in a position where we can't even trust ourselves to do the right thing, not even for our own good. That's scary.

Decades ago an Alaskan shaman was interviewed by an anthropologist about his tribe's religious beliefs. The shaman went along with the anthropologist's questions for a while, but then finally noted, "It's not what we *believe* that matters," he said. "It's what we *fear*. That's what matters." And a lot of the Buddha's teachings come right down to this: What is there to fear? What should we fear? Our own misuse of our power to shape our lives, that's what. His teachings are designed to help us learn and use that power more wisely. And that means breaking down those firewalls, those closed-off compartments in our mind that allow us to do unskillful things.

So we work with mindfulness and alertness, trying to be as continuously aware of the breath as possible without any gaps – because the gaps are what give ignorance the space to create walls, to create little dark corners where it might seem right to act on anger, on lust, on fear, passion, and greed. These things seem right because we block off our sense of shame and conscience, block off our knowledge of what's really right. And if this becomes a habit, we can't trust ourselves. We end up doing things that will harm ourselves, will harm

other people, because we create these false little worlds where karma doesn't seem to have a role, where we think we can get away with things. "It won't matter," we tell ourselves. But inevitably those walls will come crashing down, those worlds will come crashing down. The principle of cause and effect will assert itself, and what we've done *will* matter. A lot.

So this world of make-believe, in which we build these walls, in which we lie to ourselves and agree to be deceived by our own lies: That's where we have to start our work. And we do that through developing mindfulness and alertness by working on the meditation, working on being sensitive to the breath all the time, as continuously as possible.

When we learn to be true to ourselves, then the truth holds no dangers, no fear. But when we create make-believe worlds for ourselves and work hard to keep them shored up, we know deep down inside that eventually they're going to come tumbling down. Our work will be in vain. So in the back of the mind we fear the truth because we haven't been true to ourselves. But when you learn to be true to yourself, the truth holds no danger, the truth holds no fear, because you're right there with the truth all the time.

It's like a person who holds to the precept of not lying: You don't lie at all, so you don't have to remember what lie you said to this person, or what lie you said to that person, because you've been saying the truth all the time. The same principle works on the inner level as well. If you've been with the truth all the time, nothing that the truth will serve up will cause you any fear, any danger, because over time you've become more and more skillful in how you relate to the truth. Even the suffering that comes from past actions, the pain that comes from past actions: You learn how to relate to that skillfully without trying to pretend it's not there, without trying to make too big or too little an issue out of it. You simply look for exactly what it is and learn to understand it. When you understand it, you can get past it. You can transcend it.

This kind of understanding requires seeing cause and effect, seeing your actions, the results of what you've done, and learning to fine-tune your sensitivity so you become more and more skillful in relating to the truth. This, in turn, allows you to stay with the truth more and more steadily so that you don't go running off into make-believe worlds.

So the causes of suffering – craving and ignorance – are not abstract things; they're habits of the mind, often *willful* habits of the mind. Craving comes from ignorance, but ignorance can also come from craving. We set up walls in our minds to get away with the things we want to do, but we can't really get away, which is why craving and ignorance cause suffering.

So staying with the breath is not a technical exercise that allows us to bypass a lot of the necessary work in our lives. It actually gives us the tools we need in order to do the real work. But the tools need to be supplemented with the knowledge of what the Buddha taught. You can't simply do a technique and hope that the technique will reveal everything to you. You have to reflect on

what the Buddha taught about the principle of action, the principle of its results. Generosity, virtue: All the teachings form a coherent whole. Even the teachings that we tend to regard more as the religious trappings around Buddhism are really integral to the practice.

For instance, the act of taking refuge: What does it mean to take the Buddha as your guide in life? For one thing it means that you keep remembering him. The word "*sarana*," or refuge, is actually the same word for "something to remember." You try to remember the Buddha all the time. It's as if he's looking over your shoulder. His example is always there for you to reflect on: This is how true happiness is found, through the way he did it. And the qualities he developed – truthfulness, compassion, wisdom, and purity – were the way to the end of suffering. He left us the Dhamma as his guide in how to develop those qualities.

And he always based his approach in developing compassion, wisdom, and purity on the idea that we want happiness. He never assumed that we're basically good or basically bad. He builds all his teachings on the assumption that we basically want happiness. Now, our desire for happiness often seems to run counter to compassion, but the Buddha uses that desire in such a way as to foster compassion. Think about the fact that you truly want happiness. Are you different from anyone else in that? Not really. Everybody thinks the same way, everybody feels the same way. Everyone wants happiness, everyone strives for it. When that's the case, how can you create a lasting happiness for yourself that would be based on the suffering of other people when they're going to be constantly working to subvert that happiness as they work toward their own? Your search for happiness has to include a desire for other people to be happy, too. Otherwise, it won't last. When you learn to think in that way, then your desire for happiness doesn't require that you be uncompassionate or unsympathetic. Just the opposite. It becomes the basis for compassion.

The same with wisdom. The Buddha once said, "Wisdom starts with asking the question, 'What when I do it will lead to my long-term welfare and happiness?'" Here the emphasis is on the "long-term," and it builds on the realization that you are responsible for the actions that will lead to that happiness, that you have to be careful not to go running off after short-term happiness that leads to long-term pain. This is something we all sincerely desire. The Buddha's simply asking us to reflect on it in a way that leads to wisdom, leads to discernment.

And it's embodied in his teachings to Rahula, his son: reflecting on what you're going to do, your intention before you do something, "Will it lead to harm? Will it lead to happiness?" If it leads to harm, don't do it. If it looks like it's going to be harmless, then go ahead and do it. While you're doing it, however, check to see if any unexpected results are showing up. If the action leads to any unexpected harm, stop, change, do something else. If it seems to cause no harm, continue with it to the end. Even when it's done, you're not really

done, for you have to reflect on the long-term results. If the action caused unexpected harm, talk it over with someone else on the path and resolve not to make that same mistake again. If it didn't cause harm, take joy in the fact that you're on the path and keep on practicing. In other words, you don't focus on whether or not *you're* a good or bad person, which could tie you all up in knots. You focus simply on the actions and their results, and on learning from them, which is a lot more manageable. These principles apply not only to your physical actions, but also to your words and thoughts.

They also apply to your meditation. You intend to stay with the breath, to breathe and to focus on the breath in a certain way. Check to see the results: "Is it going to cause harm? Is it causing harm, is it causing pain or stress right now?" If it is, change. If it's not, keep going. When you come out of meditation, keep noticing the results of your actions. That's your meditation in daily life.

One interesting thing about these instructions to Rahula is how they begin and how they conclude. The Buddha started with the principle of truthfulness: If you can't be truthful about your actions and their results, you can't do this training at all. After giving these instructions, he concluded with the observation, "This is the way to purity." This is how you purify your thoughts, words, and deeds, through looking at your actions in terms of their intentions and the quality of the results. If you see that you've made a mistake, then resolve not to make it again. This is where the purity comes in. Purity requires not having firewalls in your mind. It means seeing the connections between what you intend to do and the results you get, realizing that you can change your ways if you've made a mistake.

So this is how compassion, wisdom, and purity – the virtues of the Buddha – are fostered: by taking our desire for happiness and learning to work with it truthfully, in a skillful way. And this is the Dhamma. This is how we take refuge in the Dhamma: remembering these principles and actually putting them into practice, so that the qualities of the Buddha appear within us, become embodied within us. By following the examples of the Noble Disciples, the third member of the Triple Refuge, we become Noble Disciples as well. That's when the Buddha, Dhamma, and Sangha become a totally internalized refuge. And that's where the refuge is really secure, where they all become one with no dividing lines among them, because at that point the *mind* becomes one with no dividing lines inside. Wisdom, compassion, and purity all come together and become one at that point.

So when we talk about divisions, or a lack of oneness in the mind, it's not an abstract, conceptual thing. We can't overcome those divisions simply by dissolving them in a feeling of oneness. They don't dissolve that way, because they were created with a purpose. We've created them through our willful ignorance. We've put up firewalls in our minds to deny that we've done certain things or that certain results have come from what we've done. So we need to learn how to take down these walls and divisions through our relentless honesty, relentless mindfulness, relentless alertness. The compartments of the mind that

would allow us to do unskillful things – which would mean that we can't trust ourselves – get torn down. The mind that's truly one is the mind that can trust itself totally. There are no hidden corners. Everything is wide open in a mind like that. We gain release from the barriers we create for ourselves, release from the suffering we create for ourselves. When those barriers and that suffering are gone, there's nothing to confine the mind, nothing to weigh it down.

And when you've made your mind trustworthy like that, you become a member of the Noble Sangha, a refuge for others, for they find that they can trust your example. This is how oneness inside leads to oneness outside: not a sentimental, oceanic feeling of oneness, but the oneness that comes when the barriers that lead to mistrust are torn down. It's through tearing down those barriers that the Dhamma of compassion, wisdom, and purity can spread throughout the world. When you gain your internal refuge of trust, you become an external refuge of trust for others. But the work has to start here. So when we're looking for the freedom and release that the Buddha talks about, this is where we look: learning to see through the barriers we create for ourselves. The release is right here to be seen, simply that we need to learn how to stop creating the barriers that get in the way. It's a demanding path, but at least it's a path of possibility. You don't have to depend on anyone else. You don't have to be afraid that other people are not going to do the work for you, because all the work is for *you* to do. And the more you tear those barriers down, the more you can trust yourself to do the work properly.