

## *Friends with the Breath*

*Thanissaro Bhikkhu*

*October 1, 2003*

When we come out to a place like this, sit down, close our eyes, we find that the physical luggage we've brought along with us is nothing compared to the baggage we're carrying around in our minds. And one of the first tasks in meditation is to let go of that baggage, for otherwise it keeps interfering, keeps getting in the way. We want to be with our breath, but thoughts of the past—this person, that person, our work, our relationships, issues out in the world—just keep coming and getting in the way. So we need some techniques for keeping them at bay. It's one of the reasons we have these chants at the beginning of the meditation. Think of them as thinking tools. We often think of meditation as a process of not-thinking, but you have to think your way to not-thinking—in other words, learn to use your thinking processes in a skillful way—before you can let them go. The various contemplations we have in the chants are there to help us with that process.

For instance, the chant we just had on the world just now: “The world is swept away, does not endure; it offers no shelter; there's no one in charge; one has to pass on, leaving everything behind; the world is insufficient, insatiable, a slave to craving.” It all sounds pretty negative, but it has a positive use. You can keep reminding yourself—every time issues of the world come up in your meditation—just what the world is like. No matter how nice you want the world to be, the world just can't be perfect. That is a liberating thought. The events in your life that you felt that you didn't handle very well—you look back and you realize that there's no way that everything can be totally perfect, no way that anything can come to total completion. The nature of the world is that everything is left at loose ends.

Many times there's a temptation, when a thought comes up in the meditation, to follow it through, tie up the loose ends, bring it to a conclusion. But the nature of the world is that there are no conclusions. The work of the world never gets done. When people stop working, it's not because their jobs are finished, it's simply they start wearing out, they can't work any more. They have to leave the work for someone else to do. Sometimes other people pick it up, sometimes they don't. This is unlike the work of the practice, for the practice is something that can reach conclusion, can come to completion. And so, although the situation in the world out there is pretty hopeless, the situation in this internal world is not hopeless—which is why energy devoted to the practice is energy well spent.

Think about that every time thoughts of the world come up and get in the way of your meditation: That's simply the way the world is—it's all incomplete.

And then we have the chant on the four sublime abidings. Those are also useful things to think about. If there are people you've wronged or people who've wronged you, you spread thoughts of goodwill. If the image of anybody comes up in your meditation, that should be your first reaction: goodwill for that person. And goodwill not in the sense that you want to get further entangled, but that you wish that person well. To truly wish well you have to wish (1) that that person can find true happiness inside and (2) that you can find true happiness inside too. The more true happiness you can find inside, the better your relationships are going to be with everybody. You don't need to feed on anybody else. You've got your own inner resources. Thoughts of goodwill, thoughts of compassion, thoughts of sympathetic joy or appreciation: Extend those to everybody. And then develop thoughts of equanimity, realizing that ultimately each of us has his or her own karma, his or her own actions, that we're each responsible for our happiness and for our suffering.

What this means is that you've got to work on your own karma — which is what we're doing as we're meditating: working on skillful karma, the noble eightfold path, which is the path we're trying to follow right here. As the Buddha said, that's the ultimate in skill, the highest form of karma. It harms no one, and it's beneficial for ourselves, not only in terms of developing happiness within the world, but also in taking us beyond the world. This path comes down to three things: virtue, concentration, discernment. At the moment we're focusing on the concentration. But all three are involved. Virtue is a quality of normalcy in our intentions, harmlessness in our intentions. As we're sitting here meditating, we're not harming anybody at all. Not only that, we're not *planning* to harm anybody. We're here focusing on getting our mind straightened out. And discernment comes into the equation as well, because you have to be discerning in how you focus your mind.

So find a good object to focus on. Once you clear the decks through your reflections, look for your breath. It's always there. The question is whether your thoughts obscure it or not. The kind of thinking that comes from the reflections we have in the chants should help bring you to the breath with a sense of the importance of what you're doing. If true happiness can't be found in the world, then find it here. Working with the breath in and of itself, as the Buddha says, putting aside greed and distress with reference to the world—in other words, any thoughts that would get you entangled in any sense of "world" outside: Just put them aside. If they come up, try to let them go. Don't let them interfere right here. Because what you're working on is a happiness that doesn't depend on the world. Anything that depends on the world is bound to end up in

disappointment— because, after all, the world is always at loose ends. But as we work on the mind here, we're developing qualities that can come to completion, that don't have to depend on the world— things that come from within, things you can be proud of, the good qualities of the mind.

Think about the things you ordinarily have to do in order to gain happiness in the world. It's always a struggle; there's always competition out there. The resources are limited. If you get something, it means someone else is not going to get it. And sometimes you have to compete in ways that you don't feel particularly proud of. But as you're meditating, you're developing nothing but good qualities: mindfulness, alertness, integrity, honesty, truthfulness, concentration, discernment. These are all good qualities; they feel good. And even if you don't get all the way to the goal, the path is a good path to be on.

And the body in meditation is a good body to be in. If you really have goodwill for yourself, you've got a start right here, giving the mind a good firm foundation. A very visceral way of showing goodwill for yourself is just this: focusing in on the breath, allowing the breath to be comfortable. If you stop to reflect, you realize that many of the things you've done in life that you later regret are things you did because you felt a sense of weakness, a sense of hunger. You needed something out there and you were willing to do anything you could think of to get it. But when you work with the breath like this and there's a sense of comfort, a sense of fullness coming from within, that sense of hunger goes away, that sense of weakness goes away, and you find yourself acting more and more from a position of strength. You find that you can trust yourself more, that people around you can trust you more as well. So right here is the basis for embodying those four sublime abidings.

All these ways of thinking keep pointing you into the breath. In terms of the narratives you tell of your life, they help direct your narrative toward being a person who wants to meditate, who has a sense of the importance of meditation, who's willing to make an effort at the meditation. So they deliver you right here. Unlike ordinary ways of thinking, which simply entangle you, these ways of thinking disentangle the tangle. Sometimes they cut right through. If you worked at minutely disentangling every single tangle in your mind, there'd never be an end to it. So you use these ways of thinking as knives to cut right through everything, to come right here to the breath, because this is the best thing you could be doing right now: getting the mind to settle down, getting a sense of being at home with the breath, being friends with the breath. Don't think of the meditation as a struggle. If you regard your breath as your enemy, you're really in bad shape, because wherever you go, there it is.

Learn to be friends with it. Listen to it. Work with it. Play with it. Learn how the breath and the mind can cooperate with each other. This requires paying

careful attention. As with any friendship, it takes time. But that length of time can be shortened if you're really attentive, if you really watch. Try different ways of focusing on the breath, different places in the body where you can focus, different ways of adjusting the breath. Sometimes all you need to do is *think* and the breath will change. Think, "Comfortable breath." Think, "Full breath." You don't have to do anything else—just maintain that thought and see what happens to the process of breathing in the body.

Or, if you want, you can play with your focus. Instead of focusing on just one spot, try to focus on two spots at once. I personally always find that riveting. One spot can be in the middle of the head, the other spot can be down in the body, and think of a line connecting the two, and you want to be aware of both of those spots, all at once, all the time. When you can maintain that double focus, you find that your mind doesn't have any other hands to latch on to things. It's as if one hand is holding on to one spot, the other hand is holding on to the other: Your hands are full.

So there's a lot to play with, a lot to work with, here in the present moment. As you work and play together with the breath, you become friends, you become companions. So instead of taking your thoughts of past and future as your companions—which we do most of the time—now the breath becomes your companion: someone to work with, someone to play with, all the time. You're never really alone. This way the body and the mind become friends, they come into alignment, they strengthen each other. It's as with any harmonious friendship: Your strength gets more than doubled—it gets multiplied many times as you work through your issues, as you get more and more familiar with the territory. This way you can drop a lot of your baggage. Even though you're still holding on to something, you're holding on to something good, right here in the present moment.

Ajaan Lee's image is of someone carrying a pole over his shoulder with loads on both ends. You see this a lot in Thailand: It's how people carry things around. You have one basket hanging from the front end of the pole and another hanging from the back end of the pole. And, as he says, when you have a pole over your shoulder like that, it's difficult to sit down, because the baskets get knocked all topsy-turvy. So what do you have to do? You have to take the pole off your shoulder. And then, even though you may be holding something in your hands—in other words, you've dropped the past, you've dropped the future, you're holding onto the present moment—you can sit down, you can rest. Ultimately you're going to work on letting go of the present. But in the meantime, you hold on fast. Because our minds have a tendency to want to grab onto things, so give them something good to grab onto—otherwise, they'll just start grabbing at anything that wanders within range.

So you've got the breath right here. And as you work with the breath, you find that the skill you develop becomes more and more useful. You can deal with any kind of breathing — which means that you can deal with any kind of situation. The breath can help in all kinds of ways. You become the kind of cook who can just walk into a kitchen and no matter what's there in the pantry, no matter what's in the fridge, you can make something really good out of it, because you've gotten really familiar with food, really familiar with the techniques for dealing with food. The same with the breath: You find there are all kinds of ways of breathing that help you when you're tired, when you're tense, when you're all antsy, angry, fearful, or bored. The breathing can help you in all kinds of ways — if you pay attention, if you give it the time.

So really get to know it. You've got a whole hour right now. You've got whole days right here. So work on this friendship. And you'll find that of all the relationships that you can have in this world, this is the one that carries you all the way to the end — and past the end. It's the one most worth developing. Everything else comes out of this. If you can't be on good terms with your own breath, it's hard to be on good terms with anybody. So you've got time now to develop this friendship. Make the most of it.