

## *Commit Yourself*

*January 15, 2006*

The easy part of meditation is focusing on the breath, because it's right here. You don't have to go looking anywhere else, you don't have to buy it from anybody. It's not one of those things you have to go order from a meditation supply catalog. It comes in and goes out right here all the time. All you have to do is think about it, and there it is.

The hard part is staying there, because the mind has a tendency not to hang out with things for very long. It stays a little bit and then gets bored, or it doesn't like what it's focusing on, and so moves to something else. Or else something else grabs its attention, forces itself on the mind. But even then, the mind has to make the choice to drop one thing and focus on something else, which it does very well. It keeps moving around all the time. This is one of the meanings of *samsara*. It's not only the traveling around from one lifetime to the next, it's also the habit of the mind here and now, moving from here to there, moving from there to over there. The two processes are connected. This is what we've been doing for who knows how long, just wandering around.

So the effort of the meditation lies in two ways. One is focusing on staying with the object you've chosen. If mindfulness lapses, you bring it up again, reestablish it on the breath. Once you've got it there, you stick with it so that your mindfulness grows and develops, your alertness to what's going on gets sharper, more refined.

As for unskillful things—which, when you're meditating, means anything else you might want to think about that's not related to the breath—as soon as you catch yourself wandering off, you drop it, with no ifs, ands, or buts. As soon as you realize you've left the breath, come back to the breath. Then do your best not to wander off again.

A lot of this depends on your ability to make the breath interesting. This why Ajaan Lee talks much about the different ways the breath energy can flow in the body, the different areas of body where you can feel the breathing process. It's not just air coming in and out the nose. It's the energy all throughout the body. And you can make a survey. You can explore the present moment to see how the process of breathing is going on anywhere in the body. Find a spot that you like and hang out there for a while, letting it become comfortable. Then see if you can make other spots in the body as comfortable as your first special favorite spot.

This way, you develop your mindfulness at the same time you're helping to prevent the mind from wandering off. That's how you can give some continuity to your practice. If you want anything good out of life, you have to learn to figure out what's really valuable and stick with it. Don't go running around, say, "Maybe that's better over there. Maybe that's better over there. Let's try that, let's try this."

I have a friend who's a novelist, I've told the story before, but for those of you haven't heard it, it's a good story to know. She's a professor at a university. Every time one of her novels comes out, she goes around to the alumni clubs and reads passages from the new novel to the alumni. So she has to figure out with each novel which passage is self-contained enough that she can read it in about 20 minutes and make sense.

In her latest novel, there's a passage where a young girl's mother has just died. This is set in 18th-century China. Her mother dies, she's distraught, and her father promises he's never going to marry again. He's going to remain loyal to his wife's memory, looking after the children. But sure enough, he's a government official and he gets sent down south. He comes back with a new wife, a courtesan. The girl is really upset, but the courtesan is no fool. She sets about to try to be a good mother to the girl.

So one evening they're playing chess. As they're playing, the new mother tries to teach some lessons to the girl. One of the lessons is that if you want happiness in life, you've got to decide that there's one thing you want more than anything else, and you're willing to sacrifice everything else, every other pleasure, for that one thing. The girl is half listening and half not listening. But as she's playing the game, she begins to realize her new mother seems to be a sloppy chess player. She's losing pieces all over the place. So the girl gets more aggressive—and she falls into her mother's trap. The mother ends up winning the game. The lesson of what she's saying is shown in how she plays the game. She's willing to lose her pawns and other pieces, but she wins the game.

My friend took this story and read it to some alumni clubs, and after two or three clubs she decided that she had to find another story, because nobody wanted to hear that message. We all want to hear that you can keep all your pawns and win at chess, too. You can get everything you want to have: That seems to be the American message right now.

But that's not the way things work in reality. You've got to decide that there is one thing you really want more than anything else, and you've got to be willing to let go of everything else for that one thing. This applies not only to the meditation, but to every aspect of the practice. Yet you see it most clearly here: You want concentration but you also want to think about this, think about that,

contemplate this Dhamma teaching, contemplate that, whatever you've read. It doesn't work. You can't hold all those things in the mind at the same time. You've got to drop one thing in order to pick up another.

And if you don't hang on to any one thing for any length of time, nothing gets developed. The mind just sticks with its old habits and keeps wandering around. It's called momentary concentration. You focus on something for a little bit and then you get bored. You don't like it and so you drop it. Nothing develops that way. The word for meditation is development: *bhavana*. And the only way to develop anything in the mind is to really stick with it.

So you sit here looking at the breath. Try to figure out how can you stay with the breath. Start asking questions about the breath. Make yourself interested in the breath. Find something you like in the breath and stick with it.

At the same time, you can be really firm with yourself. When other thoughts come up in the mind, you're not going to go there. Once you've made up your mind that way, you have to stick with it. This is the only way your momentary concentration is going to turn into anything stronger, what they call access concentration, when you finally do let go of other things. You're not yet totally with the breath, but you're getting there. Things are getting comfortable. It feels nice.

This is where you have to be careful. Once it starts feeling nice and pleasant, it's very easy to start drifting, like someone who's about to fall to sleep. This is where you have to be especially careful to keep yourself interested in the breath, spreading comfortable breath sensations through the body or allowing them to spread, at the same time letting your awareness fill the whole body.

Only that whole-body awareness can get you through this stage of concentration. If, when the breath is comfortable, your range of awareness is small, it just shrinks and shrinks and shrinks until it's gone. Or else you go into a state called delusion concentration, which feels nice and pleasant, but you don't really quite know where you are. When you come out of it, you're not sure whether you were awake or asleep. Or there's a nice kind of bright haze that you go into, like a fog on a summer day. There's light, but it's hazy. You don't know quite where you are, but it feels nice. That's not right concentration. There's no way any kind of insight can arise there.

So to fight that off, you've either got to go through the body very systematically or just stay in one spot, let your awareness fill the whole body, and do everything you can to keep it filling the whole body. Really put all your energy into it. Don't hold anything back. That way, the mind gets into fixed penetration,

where it's really solidly with the object. There's a sense that everything locks into place.

Once it's there, all you have to do is maintain it. That's when the maintaining starts getting easy. You've got a good solid foundation. Everything has been prepared. The body's patterns of tension have been ironed out, worked out, cleared out, and it becomes a nice place to stay.

It's in this way that things develop in the meditation. You've got to be true to your object. It means you're not promiscuous. You don't go hanging out a little bit here, and hanging out little bit there. You commit yourself to the breath. Only then will it show you its rewards.

This is one of those practices where, if you want to know the truth, you have to be true. There are so many things in life all you have to do is read a book and you think you know the truth about it, but this is one area where that doesn't work. You may know the words about the practice, but actually to know the truth of the practice, you have to be true it.

In the old days, they made a distinction between what's called scribe knowledge and warrior knowledge. Scribe knowledge is knowledge in words. It's what scribes know about things. They can count things, they can define terms, they can analyze things, and write everything up. Warrior knowledge is the knowledge that comes from doing things. You know how to do this, you how to do that, because you've done it. And you've been through all the difficulties and all of the obstacles the mind might set up to your knowledge, but you finally win out in the end.

Warrior knowledge requires that you really be true to what you're doing. Meditation is warrior knowledge: You commit yourself to the breath, and then the breath will show you what it has to offer. If you commit yourself to concentration, you're going to learn what concentration can do for you, what kind of knowledge it can give rise to: knowledge that's not a matter of definitions or calculation or commentary.

So if you're true to the breath, true to the practice, you're going to find the kind of truth the Buddha was talking about. And it comes from the simple ability to, one, be patient, to show some endurance to get through the difficult passages. And then, two, just keep at it. Be true to it continually, continuing, continually. That's the only way you're going to find anything new in life, to see what it's like to have a mind that is not always wandering around, and to learn what kind of knowledge comes from really staying in place.