

Dependable Friends

April 5, 2007

Okay, for the next hour, just stay with your breath. Actually, you've been spending your whole life with your breath, but most of the time you haven't been paying it much attention. But for this hour, you want to give it your full attention, which means that, since you're going to be spending so much time on it, you want to be on good terms with it. Notice how it feels as it comes in, as it goes out. Where do you feel the breath? And here we're not talking just about the passage of air through the nose. It's more the movement of energy in the body that brings the air into the lungs and then lets it go out. That energy is breath as well.

So how does it feel? Does it flow freely? Or does it get bottled up or blocked? Try to notice where it's blocked, wherever there's tension that gets in the way, and think of that tension relaxing. You might go through the body from the top on down, seeing where there's tension, allowing it to relax. Work on down a bit more, and see if there's more tension. Allow that to relax as well, so that when you're done, the whole body seems to be breathing in, and breathing out in harmony. As the Buddha said, that's what concentration is: an enlarged, still awareness. It's not just focused on one point. You have one point that's more prominent than other parts of the body, but all the images in the Canon for concentration are full-body.

When there's a sense of ease in any one spot, focus there. And learn how to focus on ease in a way that doesn't destroy it. In other words, be friends with the ease. There's another analogy from the Canon: If you hold on too tight, it's like holding a baby chick in your hand, holding it so tightly that it dies. If your focus is too loose, it's like opening your hand up so much that the baby chick flies away. You've got to find just the right amount of pressure to stay with the breath so that you're there, you don't go wandering off, but at the same time, you're not putting so much pressure on the breath that it gets uncomfortable. In this way, your awareness can be with the body and with the breath at the same time. If they're not on good terms, the breath will start getting uncomfortable, and the mind will start getting uncomfortable and want to go off someplace else.

So do your best to explore the breath, to get to know it. It's not a matter of just sitting here and allowing it to come in and out any old which way. There's always an element of adjusting the breath going on in the mind, and if you deny that fact, it goes underground. You don't see it. That certainly doesn't help insight at all. So as long as this process of adjusting the breath is going on, learn how to do it

skillfully. Bring it up, out into the open, and do it well. This way, you become friends with the breath.

As the Buddha said, there's no real practicing the path without true friends. Now, that can be understood on two levels. On the outside level, that means you find someone who really knows something about the practice. On the inside level, it means learning to be able to recognize who are your internal friends, and who are your internal enemies. You've got both. You want to learn how to cultivate your friends. You want to make the breath your friend.

All too often when you meditate, you find it difficult to stay with the object. The object starts to seem like an enemy. That doesn't help things at all. You don't want to be enemies with your breath, so as you try to stay in the present moment and it gets unpleasant, the mind is going to find reasons to go wandering off. Then when we talk about trying to maintain mindfulness, be present in the body throughout the day, it's not going to happen, because you're on bad terms with everybody in there. They're going to push you out.

This is one of *the* primary skills you want to develop as you focus on the breath: how to get the breath comfortable. Focus on the breath and then explore it, learning how to get on good terms with it. This is called directed thought and evaluation, two of the factors of right concentration. When you've got them going well, then the other factors come along, too. There will be a sense of refreshment, ease. The mind will feel able and ready to settle down and just be with one topic, and that one topic will fill your awareness. That's called singleness of preoccupation.

These are all qualities you want to develop. After all, as the Buddha said with regard to the four noble truths, suffering is something you want to comprehend, the cause of suffering is something you want to let go or abandon. Cessation is something you want to realize, to verify it for yourself. And then the path to the end of suffering is something you want to develop. So you have to actively work at developing the concentration. It's something you should feel a desire for. In the factor of right effort, it says you have to learn how to generate desire to develop skillful habits, generate desire to let go of unskillful habits, unskillful mental qualities.

So the path is not an exercise in denying desire. It's learning how to focus your desires skillfully, make them your friends as well. When concentration comes, you don't just watch it come, watch it go, and say, "Well there it is: inconstancy. I've seen it." That kind of seeing doesn't really affect anything at all because you haven't learned how to depend on the breath, you haven't learned how to depend on the concentration. It's only when you've put a lot of effort into these things

and mastered them as skills: That's when the time comes to let them go, because they have work to do for you before you let them go. So you want to work at them, develop them, learn how to understand when they come, why they come; when they go, why they go, so that you can master the conditions that make them come more often, make them stay longer.

So as each breath comes in, welcome it as a friend, and it'll start to be more friendly to you, too. Once you get the sense of familiarity and trust, then you can start maintaining that relationship throughout all your activities. When you're at work and things get difficult, you can tap into this inner friend, i.e., use the skills that you're developing here. They're not meant just for sitting here with your eyes closed. You want to develop a good long-term relationship with the breath. If you're friendly only when you're sitting quietly and then you leave it out in the cold for the rest of the day, it's not much of a friendship. You don't get much out of it. The breath certainly doesn't change in any way.

But if you try to maintain this friendship throughout the day, you'll find that you can reorient your sense of where your friends are. If you're looking for friendship outside, sometimes you get it, sometimes you don't. After all, when people deal with you, you don't know where they're coming from. Often they look at you but they don't see you, they see somebody else. They start treating you like that other person regardless of what you've done. And if you're looking for friendship in situations like that, there's often a lot of disappointment.

But your breath isn't going to look at you like anybody else. It's going to be the same breath you've working with as you meditate. If you keep giving it attention, it'll respond.

So learn how to develop these skills, how to keep bringing the mind to the breath no matter what the distractions are, how to develop a sense of ease in the spot where you're focusing, and then how to spread that ease through the body.

The image the Buddha gives is of a person who's taking a pile of bath powder. Back in those days, they didn't have soap. They had a powder that they'd mix with water, and it would turn into a lump, like a lump of dough, and then you would scrub that over your body. Nowadays, it might be easier to think of making bread. You mix the water with the flour, and the water permeates throughout the whole lump of dough and doesn't drip out, and the same time there's no flour that hasn't been moistened by the water. That's what you want.

It's the same with the body. As soon as there's a sense of ease, you want that ease to go percolating throughout the whole body. Think of it going through all your cells, out to the pores. That's a very useful skill, because it can give you a sense of whole-body refreshment. If you learn how to do it not only while you're sitting

with your eyes closed, but also in other activities—when you're doing walking meditation, and from walking meditation when you do simple chores, and from simple chores when you do more complex chores—you find that it's a really good skill to have, something good to tap into whenever you need it.

Of course, the breath is a fabrication, and ultimately the time will come when you can let go of all fabrications. But to get there, you need fabrication. After all, the noble eightfold path, as the Buddha said, is the ultimate fabrication, in other words, the most useful one. But it is something you put together, something you have to look after, even though it may not be the most dependable thing you can ever experience. After all, nibbana is the most dependable thing; the path is dependable in a sense that it'll take you there. If you look after it, it'll look after you.

So is with the sense of ease with the breath: If you learn how to develop it, it'll really help you along. Some people complain that you shouldn't fiddle with the breath because, after all, it's just a fabrication. You're going to learn how to leave fabrications alone, so learn to leave it alone now. But if we applied that principle across the board, we could say you should stop taking baths, stop looking after your body, because, after all, your body is just a fabrication. Don't bathe it. Don't feed it. What would happen? You wouldn't be able to practice at all.

Some fabrications are potentially your friends. Learn how to look after them, and they'll look after you. But as with any friendship, you have to put in a fair amount of energy. You have to show your commitment. You have to show that you're trustworthy for the friend to respond. You have to put in time and learn how to be observant.

Ajaan Fuang, when he taught meditation, would use this word more than anything else: be observant. Learn cause and effect. How do you learn cause and effect? Not by sitting and watching passively. How do scientists learn cause and effect? They go in and fiddle around with what they're trying to observe, to see what their fiddling around does. That's how you begin to see, "Oh, x causes y , because when there's no x , then y doesn't happen. And z is not involved. Whether z is present or not, y still happens. If you hadn't fiddled around with x and y , you wouldn't have known that. If you hadn't fiddled around with z , you wouldn't have known that.

So if you're going to learn cause and effect, you have to learn how to fiddle around with things. Play with your friend. See what your friend responds to. Otherwise, you're never going to know your friend at all. If you're totally passive, and a friend comes up while you're totally passive, it's like trying to make friends with a corpse. They're not going to be interested, they're going to want to go away.

So you probe and experiment, see in what ways the breath responds to your probing and experimentation. In that way, you become friends. Learn to do this with sensitivity, be very observant, and put in a lot of time. It's the time that proves the truth of the friendship and makes it deeper. Even when there are difficulties, even when there are misunderstandings, if you stick with it, you can get past the difficulties and misunderstandings, and that makes the friendship even deeper.

So spend the rest of the hour learning how to be friends with your breath, and then don't stop at the end of the hour. Keep on going.