

A Post by the Ocean

September 21, 2007

We live in a stormy world, a world of constant change. As in that passage we chanted just now about aging, illness, death, and separation—which, when you think about these things only that far, gets pretty depressing. But fortunately we don't have to think about these things only that far. We can think a little further. As in the other chant: "May I be happy." The Buddha has us respect that wish for true happiness. And he points out the way to true happiness, which is through our own actions. That's the part of the first chant that says, "I'm the owner of my actions, heir to my actions." This is what we can depend on.

Even though our actions may change, we try to develop a certain amount of constancy in the mind. This is why we're practicing concentration, focusing on the breath, staying with the breath as it comes in, staying with the breath as it goes out, doing what we can to make it easy to stay with the breath. Part of that involves allowing the breath to be comfortable, and having the sense that the breath is not just air coming in and out of the lungs. We learn how to perceive the breath as the whole-body energy flow. How do the different parts of the body feel during the in-breath? Do you tend to tense up around your neck, or in your shoulders? Can you breathe-in in a way that you don't tense up? It's all connected—your posture, the way you breathe, the way the blood flows through the body. You can explore these issues as a way of making it easier to stay here.

Another way of making it easier to stay here is to have the right view about what you're doing. It may seem a little thing, just keeping the mind in one spot. You can think of all the other things you might be doing right now, all the other responsibilities you have, all the other problems you could solve. Those things can pull you away—because it's not just gross manifestations of greed, anger and delusion that pull us away. Your misinformed sense of responsibility can also pull you away: that sense of, "Well, I've really got to think about this. I've got to prepare for that. I've got all these other responsibilities out there in the world, things I've got to prevent, things I've got to encourage." But when you think in those ways, you're neglecting one of your major responsibilities, which is that if you're going to do anything effective, anything skillful, the mind has to have a good solid basis inside.

It's like a post at the edge of the ocean. If your post is planted firmly down in the sand—or even better, if it's firmly planted down into the rock below the sand—then when the waves come in, the waves go out, the post doesn't go in,

doesn't go out with them. You can use that post for lots of useful things. It can become a post on which you build a house. It can be a post to which you tie up your boat, so that the boat doesn't get washed out to sea. And the post itself doesn't get damaged much by the waves.

But if you take your post and lay it down at the edge of the ocean—thinking that by laying it down there you can prevent the waves from coming in much better than if it's standing in one spot—what happens of course is that the post gets washed in, washed out, and after a while, it gets smashed against a rock someplace. If anything is tied to the post, it'll get smashed, too. In other words, if you take on too many responsibilities out in the world but don't have a firm foundation for the mind, the mind ends up getting smashed to pieces. And it's of no use to anybody.

So while you're focused on one small point right here—just the breath, just the body—it may seem like you're neglecting your other responsibilities, but in actuality you're not. You're providing a solid foundation for the mind. A mind with a solid foundation is a lot more useful, both for you and for the people around you. Take this as your prime responsibility.

Because there's really only so much you can do for the world. You may think about other people you'd like to help, but there are areas of their minds, areas of their experience, where you can't reach, where you can't touch them at all. You see this very clearly when someone is sick and suffering in pain. You can't go in and help share out the pain. You may be able to give that person a medicine that helps relieve the pain somewhat. But sometimes there's so much pain that it goes beyond the reach of any morphine, any opium, any painkiller at all. That's where that person has to be responsible for him or herself. You see this in other people and it should remind you that you're going to have to face those same issues someday yourself. That's an area where each of us has to be responsible. If we can be responsible about how we handle our pain, we're much less burdensome to the people around us.

After all, it *is* our responsibility. We were the ones who chose to be born here. It was because of our desires and our cravings that we took birth as human beings. When you're responsible for your birth, then you also have to be responsible for how you handle your aging, illness, and death. They all come as part of the same package. And the point from which you're going to learn how to handle these things is this point right here—as you're focused on the breath, focused in the present moment, learning how to let go of all your other wrong views, all your other distractions, all the other things you might cling to that are going to end up getting you smashed against the rocks.

So try to maintain this spot. Think of it as a post planted against the waves of the ocean. Even though the post gets knocked over, you realize you shouldn't let

it stay knocked over. You know it's in a better position when it's standing up, planted down deep into the sand. Just knowing that much can help a lot. Otherwise, you feel you owe it to other people to let your post lie down in the waves, thinking that the post somehow will protect them from the force of the waves. But what happens is that sometimes the waves come behind the post and push up against other people, smashing *them* up against the rocks. So it's both for your own good and for the good of the people around you that you try to keep this post firmly planted right here. And try to keep your views right. There's a lot out there in the world that you cannot change. There's a lot you can't even know.

Kierkegaard once commented that we live life forward but we understand backwards. In other words, there are a lot of decisions we have to make right now, but we don't really know how they're going to turn out tomorrow or the next day, next month, next year. We can look back on decisions we made in the past and say, "Gee, I shouldn't have done that; I shouldn't have said this." And in some cases, we made the wrong decision fully knowing what we were doing. Those are the decisions that carry a lot of blame. But a lot of times, we made that wrong decision because we couldn't know. That kind of decision is something you can't blame anybody for. Nobody can blame you; you can't blame anybody else. So you have to leave that to being uncertain. It's part of the winds and the waves.

Like tonight's weather forecast: They say there may be a storm coming in. We don't know for sure. We do our best to prepare. If the storm doesn't come in, will we say, "Well, all that preparation was a waste of time, a waste of energy. We could've done other things." That's not the right attitude. You prepare as best you can. And as for the things you don't know, you just let them go. What you do know are certain basic principles. If you can develop more mindfulness, more alertness, more concentration, more discernment in the mind, you'll be better prepared for handling things as they come up, even if you don't know ahead of time what they will be. If you've got these qualities developed in the mind, you'll be in a better position to handle anything, whatever comes your way.

The prime means for developing these qualities is by giving the mind one place to stay still, and then maintaining that stillness regardless of whatever else may come to knock it over. In some cases, that requires just being mindful and alert to what's happening. In other cases, it requires more discernment, catching the currents of the mind that would knock you over, learning how to resist the ones that say, "You really ought to think about this; you really ought to worry about that. You're sitting here with your eyes closed focusing on your breath, ignoring your responsibilities." You've got to learn how to be able to argue with those thoughts so that they don't overcome the mind.

So remember the post at the edge of the sea. If it's just lying down there on the sand, the waves will come up, and the post will get washed back and forth. If there are people standing on the beach, the post might hurt them. If there are rocks on the beach, the waves might wash the post up against the rocks and smash it. You don't want that. If your post is planted firmly there at the edge of the water, it's a lot more useful for yourself and for the people around you.

So have a sense of the value of staying firmly planted right here, focused right here, developing this stillness as a skill, getting the mind to be as constant as possible. We know that the constancy you create through concentration like this cannot be totally constant. After all, you're building your path here out of what are called aggregates. And as the Buddha said, all these aggregates are inconstant, stressful, and not-self. When we're resisting that to some extent, we know that we can't ultimately make our state of concentration permanent. But what we *are* doing is giving the mind the strength it needs to let go of things that cause harm, of things that cause suffering, because we're letting go from a position of strength. We don't let go out of weakness. If people let go out of weakness, there's bound to be an element of sour grapes, an element of dissatisfaction or resentment, which means that they don't really let go. They're hoping for some other time when they can latch on again.

But if you let go out of strength, you let go for sure. When you've let go of things outside your concentration, then you can turn and look at the concentration itself. You realize that your concentration and discernment have taken the mind this far, but they can take it no further. The only thing that's keeping you from going further is the fact that you're holding on. That's when you let go out of genuine strength. When you let go in that way, you find that there's something deep down in the mind that's constant, totally free from stress, beyond even the issues of self and not self—something that can't be affected by the wind or waves at all.

The image in the texts is of a stone post sixteen spans tall, planted into the solid rock of a mountain. Eight spans are buried in the rock; eight spans are aboveground. No matter which direction the wind comes from, it can't make the post shake at all. But until you can get to that point, use your post at the edge of the ocean. It may get knocked over now and then, but you know well enough once it's knocked over how to plant it down in the sand again. Even just this much can help you through a lot. It can help eliminate a lot of suffering even before you come to the end of suffering. And that's quite an accomplishment right there.