

A Refuge Inside

June 10, 2006

Focus on your breath. When the breath comes in, know it's coming in. When it goes out, know it's going out. Focus on whichever part of the body you find the sensation of breath is clear. It may be at the tip of the nose. It might be at the throat, the rising and falling of the chest, or the rising and falling of the abdomen.

Then notice how the breathing sensation feels. Does it feel comfortable? Does it feel comfortable all the way through the in-breath, all the way through the out-? Does it feel too long, or does it feel too short? You can adjust it. Try to find some place in the body where the breathing process feels good, feels nourishing coming in and relaxing going out.

There's a tendency sometimes to force the breath too much when you focus on it. It gets constricted, but it's hard to stay with a sense of constriction. So try to find some place where there's a sense of comfort that you can associate with the breath, and then maintain that sense of comfort with whatever rhythm or texture of breathing feels good. Explore.

What you're doing is trying to find a place where the mind can stay in the present moment with a sense of ease, a sense of comfort, because if there's no sense of ease, the mind won't stay. The Buddha once said that one of the prerequisites for the ability to concentrate the mind, to get the mind to settle down in the present moment, is a sense of well-being. So try to develop that.

The potential is here. This body has all kinds of potentials. There's a real potential for pain. As Ajaan Suwat once said, you could take an iron spike, stick it in any part of the body, and you'd get pain. The potential is there. But there's also the potential for ease. This is why we were born into the human body. We wanted the kind of comfort and pleasure that comes from the human body, but we didn't take a good look at the contract. In the fine print, it says: When there's birth, there's going to be aging, there's going to be illness, there's going to be death.

But you don't have to wait for aging, illness, and death to see the problems that can come with having a body. That chant we had just now on the four requisites: These are things the body needs in order to live with any sense of comfort at all. It needs clothing, food, shelter, medicine. The minute you're born, you have these needs, and these needs stay with you all the way through life. There's a lot of stress, a lot of pain that comes with trying to find these things, and then you have to find them again, find them again.

When the Buddha says “illness,” don’t think that he means only the diseases that doctors can treat. The basic illness of the body, the Buddha said, is hunger. Its basic illness is thirst. And these come all the time. You feed the body in the morning, and by afternoon it’s hungry again. You feed it in the afternoon, it gets hungry at night. There’s never a point where it can stay full.

So you’ve got all these dangers and diseases associated with having a body. But as the Buddha points out, there are some aspects of a body that you can put to use for the purpose of developing the mind. You can work with the breath to get a sense of comfort. When you use that sense of comfort to develop mindfulness, alertness, concentration, then you’re making good use of the body’s potentials.

For the time being, focus on the positive potentials, because if the mind doesn’t have a pleasant place to stay here right now, it’s going to go wandering, looking for something else, creating all different kinds of imaginary thought worlds to dwell in. Then they’re going to fall apart, and you’ll have to create some more. There’s no real gratification, no lasting satisfaction coming from those things. Yet the mind gets a little taste of a little bit of satisfaction, so it keeps looking for it—the same reason it came into this body to begin with—looking for pleasure, looking for ease and, for the most part, looking in the wrong places. So keep bringing the mind back to the present and find some place where the process of breathing, the energy flow in the body, feels good, so that the mind can develop a sense of being centered here, at home here. In that way, it begins to develop a refuge.

When we’re born into this body, we think we can depend on the body, and we can to some extent. But it doesn’t provide us with a real refuge because it itself is a lot of the problem. Or to put it another way, the mind’s attachment to the body is the real problem. We want a real happiness out of the body, and yet it can’t provide it—and you can’t blame it. That’s just the way it is. It’s inconstant, stressful, and not-self, and yet we try to create happiness out of it. We look for a refuge here. Again, we’re looking in the wrong place. The refuge has to come from the mind. You develop mindfulness, the ability to keep something in mind. You develop alertness, the ability to know what’s going on: what you’re doing, what the results of what you’re doing are. Those are the beginning of a real refuge.

We take refuge in the Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Sangha, but that doesn’t mean we’re finding our ultimate refuge in Prince Siddhartha of 2600 years ago, or in the words of the Dhamma, or in the monks who form the monastic Sangha, or even in the noble ones who form the noble Sangha. Those are external refuges, and they play a role in our search for a refuge; they’re our examples. You look to the Buddha for an example. How did he find happiness? By developing mindfulness

and alertness to give rise to concentration in the mind. He used the concentration to develop discernment that led to release. So you take his example and follow it in your own life. You try to develop mindfulness and alertness as well, to gain a sense of being centered and at home in the present moment with a sense of ease—even of rapture.

Then you use that concentration to develop discernment to see how exactly the mind creates suffering. When the Buddha talks about suffering, there are basically two kinds. There's the suffering of the three characteristics. As he says, *Sabbe sankhara dukkha*: All fabricated things are suffering. But then there's also the suffering of the four noble truths, what he calls the five clinging-aggregates. The first kind of suffering is just the way things are, in and of themselves. The question is: Why does that create suffering for us? Because of our clinging. So you've got to watch the mind to see why it clings, because the suffering of the four noble truths is what creates a real problem for the mind. Without that kind of suffering, the stress of the three characteristics wouldn't impinge on the mind at all.

So you've got to catch the mind in the act, and for that you need mindfulness and alertness. Remind yourself: The problem is not outside. The problem is not with the body; the problem is with the mind's relationship to the body. Or when there's pain or illness, the problem is not the pain or illness; it's our desire to hang on to the body in such a way that there wouldn't be any pain and there wouldn't be any illness. But that's impossible. This is built into the way that bodies are. *Jara-dhammombhi, byadhi-dhammombhi*: As long as there's a body, we're subject to aging, subject to illness, subject to death. This is just the way bodies are.

The problem is our clinging. We hope to get gratification for our sensual desires out of the body. We hope to identify with the body as our self: That's a kind of clinging, too. We have certain views about the way the body should be. The body should be healthy, we may think. The body shouldn't get old so quickly. "My body shouldn't get ill. Why me?" That's a big question a lot of people ask when they find themselves growing ill. Go back and look at other people's bodies. They may not show the symptoms of illness yet, but everybody has that potential.

But as long as you also have the potential for ease and well-being in the body, make use of that potential to develop a sense of being at home, so that you can develop the mental qualities that'll allow you to be with aging and yet not suffer, to be with illness and not suffer—even to be with dying and not suffer. Catch the mind in the act of creating the clinging, trying to feed off the body and find some gratification here. Catch it in the act to remind it: You're looking in the wrong place. You should look at the mind that's concentrated, the mind that has

mindfulness and discernment protecting it. That's where your refuge can be found.

So, given the fact that we have this body, learn how to make the best use of it. Use it as a tool for developing concentration; use it as a tool for developing discernment. If you can use it in that way, there are no problems. As Ajaan Suwat once asked, "That mountain over there on the eastern horizon: Is it heavy?" Then he answered, "Well, if you try to pick it up, yes, it is heavy. If you don't try to pick it up, it's not heavy for you." The same way with the body: If you try to find sensual gratification out of the body or something you could identify with in the body, you're going to suffer. That's just the way it is. Even when the body's going relatively well, there's going to be suffering. But if you realize you can't look *there* for your gratification, that you've got to look into the mind and develop good qualities in the mind that become your home, become your refuge, then ultimately you can find the real refuge inside, which is release, liberation, *vimutti* —a state of mind that nothing can touch.

But until you get there, you've got to work at the right qualities to get yourself there. So as you're staying with the breath, it's not just an exercise in stress reduction or relaxation. You're using the sense of well-being in the present moment so that you can develop the qualities of mind that can be your protectors, that can catch you in the act of creating unnecessary suffering for yourself and can teach you how to accept that, okay, yes, the body will age, will grow ill, and it's going to die.

Now, the process always seems to be coming too early; it creeps up on you. But it's always too early for everybody. If you complain, "I'm not ready for this yet!" you create more problems for yourself. If that's what's here, then you deal with it. The purpose of developing this mindfulness and alertness is to catch sight of how the mind creates the suffering it doesn't need to create. Then you realize the suffering is not something imposed on you by the body; it's because of your own attachment, your own reaching out and trying to grab hold of the body. Once you can stop that happening, then you're in a much better position.

The first way to stop that is to give the mind something else to hold on to. Some people think that if states of stillness arise in the mind, you've got to learn how to let go of them, so that you're not attached to anything. The Buddha never taught that way. When states of stillness arise in the mind, he says you've got to develop them. It's one of the duties in the four noble truths. Suffering is something to comprehend; the *cause* of suffering is what you let go. As for the end of suffering, that's something you want to realize. And the path to the end of

suffering, which includes right mindfulness and right concentration: That's something you want to develop. You work on it; you try to make it into a skill.

So don't be in a hurry to let go of everything, because there are certain things you'll have to hold on to. As long as the mind has this tendency to hold on, give it something good to hold on to. The Buddha taught that his teaching is like a raft. Use it to cross the stream. Once you've crossed the stream, you don't have to hold on to it any more. But while you're still crossing the stream, you've *got* to hold on.

When you can develop a sense of well-being in the mind, learn how to protect it and maintain it so that it's not knocked off by outside conditions. It's not knocked off by pains, aging, illness, or death arising in the body. That's something you can work on, something you can develop. That can be your potential refuge. It's only when refuge is brought inside that the refuge is true.