

## *Appropriate Attention Plus Admirable Friendship*

*January 12, 2017*

Bring your attention to the breath, and try to keep it here. Follow the breath in the same way that you'd follow a road: Just keep going, step, by step, by step, not wandering off to the forests and the fields on the left or the right, but staying right on the road. Because this is a road that goes someplace. Remember, this is the path to the end of suffering.

As the Buddha said, there are two factors that are important in leading to awakening: the internal factor is something he calls *appropriate attention*, the external factor is *admirable friendship*. Appropriate attention means seeing things in terms of the four noble truths and the duties of those truths. So when you remind yourself that you're following the path, that's part of appropriate attention. And you remember what the duty is: to develop this. In other words, you don't say, okay, here's a little bit of concentration, I'm going to watch it deteriorate and learn the truths of inconstancy, stress, and not-self. That's not how you treat concentration.

You treat concentration as something to cherish, something to carry gently but firmly in your hands. The image the Buddha gives is of a baby quail. When you're holding a baby quail in your hands, if you hold it too loosely it's going to fly away; if you hold it too tightly, it's going to die. So concentration is something you want to nurture, like a baby animal or a baby child. And that means you have to give it your full attention.

We often hear about bare attention as a part of the meditation, but the Buddha never talks about bare attention. There's either appropriate attention or inappropriate attention. Inappropriate attention is when you're looking at things in the wrong terms and figuring out the wrong duties. Appropriate attention has to do with the questions you ask yourself.

So right now, what questions are you asking yourself? They should be around, *How do I stay here? How do I stay here with a sense of ease?* Two of the steps in breath meditation are to breathe in and out with a sense of rapture or refreshment, or to breathe in and out with a sense of pleasure, ease. How do you do that? Part of it has to do with the way you breathe; part of it has to do with the way you relate to the breath. And "relating" here can be either putting too much pressure on it, as I said just now, or put too little pressure. Or trying to squeeze it in ways that are unnatural. Let the breath have some freedom, but keep tabs on it.

In some ways it's like being an inspector at a factory. As the materials go by, you just watch them going by, but you have to pay very careful, continuous attention. Say it's a long roll of cloth that's going out, and you have to be right there, checking every inch as it goes past, but you don't have to touch it, you don't have to force it. It's going to go past—you just keep your attention fixed right here.

And then to continue the image, if something's not quite right with the way the cloth is going past, you can make little adjustments. With the breath, the adjustments are simply to think, "What would longer breath be like? What would a shorter breath be like?" Or just ask questions: "What does the body need right now?" And see how it responds. "How about deeper breathing, more shallow breathing, heavier, lighter?" The adjustment is just in the thinking, and then allowing the body to respond. When it responds, which way feels best? What can you stay with for a while, with a sense of feeling at home?

If you don't feel at home with the breath, you're like an animal that's jumped onto something wobbly and is going to get ready to jump as soon as there's danger. In other words, the animal can't really rest at all where it is, so it's got to stay tensed up. But if you have a sense of well-being and trust, both in the breath and in your ability to stay here, then the mind can relax and spread out in the present moment. Because you do want to have your awareness filling the whole body. It's when your awareness is just a point: That's when it's ready to go. But when it's filling the whole body, it's a lot harder for it to move. But it also feels a lot better to be right here.

So all of these things are ways of exercising appropriate attention. When something comes up that's going to disturb the meditation, that's something that's going to cause suffering, so you want to abandon it. If there's any pain in the body, you want to investigate it. This means you're remembering the duties of the four noble truths. That's one of the duties of mindfulness, and that's how you pay appropriate attention here.

If a pain comes up, remember that the Buddha said to *investigate, comprehend*. We don't try to run away from it; we don't try to get rid of it. We're trying to make the mind solid enough so that we can look: "What is this pain? Why am I afraid of it? It's something that's naturally happening in the body, but why do I feel invaded by it?" Probe and ask questions, and when you probe the pain, that changes your relation to it. You're not just on the receiving end. It's almost as if, when you start probing, you're moving around, and the pain can't shoot you. If you're sitting still, just on the receiving end, it's going to shoot you. So ask some questions about it, to see if it's disturbing the concentration enough that you have to look at it, ask questions about it.

Otherwise, you find that there are times when the pain can be in one part of the body but you're centered in another part and you feel fine where you are. Well, let the mind stay there for a while. That's how it gathers strength. As you do this, you begin to develop skill, to figure out what works for you and what doesn't work. The instructions in the meditation guides are general principles, but a large part of the practice lies in learning how to apply the general principles to your specific problems, and see what results you get. It's there that the learning really happens.

The external factor that the Buddha said is most important for the practice is having admirable friends, in other words, people you can trust. He said there are four qualities you

want to look for in the people you're going to stay with. *Conviction* in the principle of action, in other words, belief that what you do really does matter, really will make a difference, *generosity*, *virtue*, and *discernment*. The Buddha said that one of the advantages of living with a person like that is that you get a good example and, two, you get to hear the Dhamma. But sometimes the examples shout louder than the Dhamma you hear. You see the person in action, and the longer you stay with that person, the more you pick up of that person's habits. So when you're choosing people to associate with, either on a social level or in business, these are the qualities you want to look for, because these are the people you'll be living with, these are the values you have to live with, these are the values that you'll be soaking up.

And as we were saying last week, the sense of wanting to look good in the eyes of those people is going to be a large factor in your relationship. So whose eyes do you want to look good in? What values do you want to be judged by? That's an important question you want to ask yourself as you're choosing who to associate with. Because the people you associate with have a huge impact on your life and on your practice of the Dhamma. This is why the Buddha put admirable friendship very early in many of the lists of how to make progress in the practice of the Dhamma. You see these two factors—both appropriate attention and admirable friendship—playing a mutually supportive role throughout the Buddha's teachings.

Even in the teachings to the Kalamas, that famous sutta that's always described as the Buddha's charter for free inquiry—in other words, don't believe anything you hear, don't believe anything you see written down, just go by your own sense of what's right and wrong. That's what people say the sutta says—but it doesn't say that.

On the one hand, it says that it's not valid to say that things are true simply because they're in the texts, or because the teacher said it, but they're also not true just because they seem reasonable to you, or fit in with things you already believe. Which means that you just can't take your already-held views as your guide. On the one hand, he says you have to ask yourself, when this particular teaching is put into practice, what actions does it lead to, and what results do those actions give? That's basically a lesson in appropriate attention, seeing that a teaching is important in terms of what it gets you to do.

But not only that, the Buddha says also that you want to listen to the counsel of the wise. Look for actions that are praised by the wise; avoid actions that are criticized by the wise. That's the principle of admirable friendship. How do you know who's wise? Well, you hang around them for a while. The Buddha says you can judge people in terms of their discernment by how they handle discussions. Do they handle discussions in a fair way? Do they handle discussions in a way that shows they have a lot of insight?

But more than that, are they pure in their dealings with other people? This is how you get to know their purity. As they engage with other people, say, in a trade, or in business, are they fair? You get to know the person's persistence, or patience or endurance by how they put up

with difficult situations. And you get to know their virtue by living with them and being observant.

You have to be observant in all these cases. Just because people sound friendly, seem nice, say nice things, doesn't mean they're virtuous. You have to stay with them for a while before you really know. This means often when you're getting to know other people, you have to take some time before you decide whether it's worth continuing the relationship. The people who pass these tests are the ones you want to associate with, the ones whose opinions should be important as you develop these two qualities together: admirable friendship and appropriate attention. There's an inner and an outer dimension to the practice.

And even though the outside is largely beyond your control, you do have your choices outside, just as you have choices inside, so learn how to exercise your power of choice well. Which doesn't mean that you'll never make mistakes, but you know how to learn from them. Remember the Buddha's instructions to Rahula: If you plan to do something, one, you ask yourself what your intention is. Two, while you're doing it, look at what the immediate results are. And then three, when the action is done, look at the long-term results. If the results weren't good, go talk it over with someone more advanced on the path—another example of combining appropriate attention with admirable friendship.

These two principles help each other all along the way. So make sure in your practice of the Dhamma that you're looking at both sides, because that's how both sides get nourished, and ultimately the mind gets nourished—as all the elements of the practice come together.