

# *Taking a Stance*

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Try to gather your awareness around the breath. Make the breath your center, a center from which you can act, speak, and have a sense of a good foundation.

In Pali, the word for the object of the mind, *arammana*, literally means a “support” for the mind. When you meditate, you want to find a good, solid support, because when your support is solid you can deal with whatever’s coming at you from whatever direction, whether thoughts inside the mind or things people do or say from outside. Your response – if it comes from a solid foundation – is coming from a position of strength. When you come from a position of strength, the things you do, say, and think are well thought out. They aren’t desperate, aren’t grasping. If your center is based on things outside – if you’re really concerned about what this or that person thinks about you – you’re putting yourself in a very weak, uncertain position. Your foundation isn’t solid. When it isn’t solid, the things you do aren’t well based.

When I first went to Thailand I taught at Chiang Mai University. One of the things I learned in my spare time there was Thai boxing. When you’re first taught Thai boxing, all the emphasis is on your stance – the stance from which you’re going to hit or kick your opponent. If the stance is solid, you’re coming from a position of strength. This may sound a little aggressive, but it’s an important point to remember as you go throughout life. When you’re dealing with other people, when you’re dealing with all the issues in your mind, you want to come from a good, solid position so you can deal with these things effectively.

The breath is always here. When you’re at ease with your breath, when you feel comfortable with your breath, you’ve got a good foundation. That’s where you can take your stance. Then when you respond to things, you’re coming from a solid position. Your response is more precise, more on target. So try to practice keep coming back to the breath, back to the breath because this is a foundation you’ve got to build.

It may seem artificial at first, but as you get more and more used to it, you find that it really does provide a sense of being at home. One of the Pali terms for a concentrated mind, “*vihara dhamma*,” means just that: a home for the mind, a place where you feel safe, where you feel solidly protected, not only from things outside but also from all the issues that come bubbling up from inside as well. Because the biggest problems in life are not the events from outside, but in how you react to them.

Even before events come at you from outside, things come bubbling up from within the mind. Sometimes anger comes up in the mind and then you go looking for something to be angry about. It’s not in response to anything outside;

it's simply an urge coming up in the mind. Then you go out to focus on something outside that you decide you don't like, and the anger builds on that. The same with lust, with fear and anxiety: Sometimes the feeling comes bubbling up and then you look for an object for it to focus on.

So it's not the case that all problems come from outside. Actually, most of them come from within, but the fortunate thing is that not everything inside is problematic. You've got good qualities in here as well, so you want to give them a place to gather so they can pool their strength. That's why you need this foundation. When you're staying with the breath, you've got mindfulness, the ability to keep something in mind. You keep reminding yourself, "Stay right here with the breath." And then there's alertness: You watch the breath as it comes in, goes out; you know what's happening. It's right there. Whether it's comfortable or not, you know.

If it's not comfortable, you can change it. This is called evaluation. The basic indicator is, "Does the breath feel good or not?" For the Buddha, the big issue in life is suffering, so we start with a minor version of it – a minor sense of discomfort coming from the breath. Why breathe in a way that's uncomfortable? Nobody's forcing you. It's your own lack of attention that allows the breath to get uncomfortable. So pay attention and then learn to work with the breath. See what kind of rhythm feels good, because when the breath goes well it gives you strength, a sense of wellbeing, a sense of being nourished, around which all your other good qualities of mind can gather. When they can gather together, they strengthen one another.

So even though staying focused on the breath may require time and effort, it's an important skill, for once you have this center it's here not only when you sit with your eyes closed. Wherever you go, there's the breath. When you learn to relate to the breath in a good way, you have a good relation going on inside. In other words, you learn to treat the breath with goodwill: You want the breath to be comfortable. When you find that it's not comfortable, you work to help it: That's compassion. When it *is* going well, you help to maintain it: That's appreciation. And when it gets to the point where it's as good as you can get it, you can't get it any better than that, you say, "For the time being, this is as good as it's going to get; let's sit down and just be right here": That's equanimity.

If you learn to relate to your own breath in these ways, it becomes a lot easier to relate to events and people outside with the same qualities. If there's a turmoil inside, then the turmoil tends to affect your relationships with other people. The way you relate to yourself inside forms the pattern, the template, for how you relate to people outside. So you want to establish a good relation in here, a good family relationship with all these good qualities: mindfulness, alertness, your discernment in telling what's comfortable and what's not, your ingenuity in figuring out ways to make things more comfortable. And the qualities of goodwill, compassion, appreciation, and equanimity – they play a role here as well.

When you learn to relate to the breath with these qualities of mind, then every time you get in touch with the breath, the qualities can be there as well. They nurture and inform the way you're going to react to whatever comes up, wherever you are. Whether it's at work or at home, or between work and home, whether you're alone, whether you're with other people – when you've got this good relationship going on inside, when you feel at home with all these good qualities in the mind, then you can tap into them whenever you want.

So this ability to find a center, to establish a foundation in the mind, is one of the basic skills we need to be happy, to be friends with ourselves. The chant just now on true friends and false friends doesn't refer just to people outside. It also refers to qualities of mind. Some qualities in the mind – like greed, anger, and delusion – are false friends. They come promising all kinds of things, and then they don't deliver. They run off to desert you, leaving you worse off than before. Those are your false friends inside. The true friends are the ones who are really helpful, like the good qualities we're trying to gather around the breath here. So, you "attend to them earnestly," as the chant says. Try to keep these qualities informing the way you relate to the breath, and that becomes the foundation from which you relate to things in all your activities.

We have a whole hour to work at this skill, a skill that you don't leave here when the hour is up, but that you take with you. It becomes the basic pattern for how you relate to the body, how the mind relates to itself. It cuts through a lot of the unnecessary stress and frustration, unnecessary turmoil in the mind. So look at this hour as an opportunity to provide yourself with a center. And then after the hour is over, take the center with you wherever you go, because it's always here.

The breath is the point where the mind and the body meet, and as long as you're alive you'll have this breath right here. If you can learn to be at home right here, you're going to have a home wherever you go. As a result, wherever you go will be your own space.

A large part of our life is spent in feeling that somehow other people have taken possession of our space, and we need to depend on their approval so that we can occupy their space. But that's not the case here. This is your space. When you're happy and comfortable inhabiting your space, you're coming from a position of strength and wellbeing at all times.