

## *Forging a Path*

*January 14, 2014*

Allow all your thoughts to circle in and settle down. Try to be right here with the body, right here with the breath. Take some good long in-and-out breaths. Think of the breathing as a whole-body process. Give the mind an anchor. Don't clamp down on the breath, don't clamp down on the mind, because if you do, it's going to resist and rebel. Just try to be consistently aware of how the breath feels, and that there's always breath here in the body. There's the in-and-out breath, but there's also the breath energy that runs through the nerves, runs through the blood vessels. You can just be with that: without break, without pause.

This gives the mind a much needed place to settle down. Otherwise, it's jumping around, pouncing on this, thinking about that, planning about this. And admittedly there are a lot of dangers all around us—the wind this evening gave us just a little taste of what it can do, and there's no guarantee that it's not going to come back again later tonight. In fact, the worst windstorm we've ever had here was in a January, and the wind didn't obey the weather forecast. It was supposed to die down at midnight, and at midnight it actually got worse.

When you think about the elements—wind, water, fire, earth—they're all pretty huge, and you realize that this little body we've got here is so small compared to them. So of course, there will be things we tend to worry about. There are a lot of forces all around us that are a lot bigger than we are. So what are we going to do? Are we going to continue to hang on to this body or are we going to look for something bigger inside?

That's what the meditation is all about—there's a dimension inside that's bigger than wind, water, fire, and earth, bigger than all the forces around us. But it requires skill to find it. That's what we're doing right here: We're learning the skills needed to find genuine safety. As the Buddha said, once you hang onto the body, the body leaves you open to all kinds of things: fists, clods, knives, and that's just what human beings can do to you.

So we've got to learn how to use the body to get the mind to settle down, and then get the mind to look into itself more deeply. This is why we focus on the breath. Of all the various elements in the world, it's the closest to our awareness, and it's one of the functions in the body over which we actually have some control. You can try long breathing, short breathing, heavy, light, shallow, deep. Experiment to see what kind of breathing feels best right now. This does involve some thinking, in fact, the factors of right concentration start out with directed thought and evaluation, as mentioned in the chant just now. You may say, "I thought we're here to learn how not to think." And there does come a point in the meditation when the thinking processes really do die down, but you have to learn how to use them first before you can put them aside—use them wisely, use them skillfully.

This is because our mind is a very active mind. We don't just passively receive things. We're actively going out and shaping things. It was this tendency of the mind that latched on to this body to begin with: This is why we're here. And it tries to arrange the world so that it's a good place for the body to stay. And it works for a while, and it works in some circumstances, but in other circumstances the whole process turns around and bites you. But we can't stop. We just keep acting and thinking and planning and deciding things—unless we really train the mind to settle down.

We train it by deciding first to stay in one place. And to think about that one place, and to examine it, evaluate it, so that it becomes a better place to stay. If you force the mind to stay with an uncomfortable breath, it's going to rebel. So give it a sense of ease in the breathing. Allow the breathing to become refreshing. This gives the mind something good to do, and you begin to see the other activities of the mind, because of course as you make up your mind to stay with one thing, there will be other members of the committee that say, "No, I'd rather think about this" or "What about that thing that happened today?" or "What about tomorrow?" or whatever. If you don't resist these voices, you just slide along with them without thinking, without really noticing anything. The mind gets bounced around from thought to thought, and from sight to sound to smell to taste. It just bounces back and forth.

It's like those diagrams you see of particles in the air when they study Brownian motion—the particles just bounce around randomly, in little zig-zags. Or like those maps that you see of the arctic explorers, the ones whose boats got caught up in the arctic ice mass and just moved around. They moved north and south and east and west and around and around and around in little squiggly lines. For a lot of us, that's what our minds are like; we go for this, go for that, jump around here and there, and end up not really going anywhere. This is because, even though we have an active approach to our lives, we have lots of different agendas, lots of different plans.

What the Buddha's recommending is that you set your sights on one thing: that bigger dimension inside; that dimension where there's no death, no illness, no suffering. And instead of allowing your map of your life to just be squiggly lines wandering and bouncing around, try to make it into a path—a path that goes someplace.

So as you're sitting here and different intentions come up, learn how to resist them. Don't let yourself get bounced off the breath in some other direction. Think of the breath as your path. When you're really with the breath, you've got right concentration, right effort, right mindfulness. As you use the stillness of the mind to try to understand what's going on, then all the other factors of the path come together—and it does go someplace. Instead of just being bounced around by the currents and the ice floes, your mind takes on a direction. You start peeling away the different layers of what Upasika Kee called the layers of film in the mind: the way the mind hides things from itself.

We do that a lot. When we jump from one thing to the next, there's a little bit of blacking out, as we go from one thought world to the next thought world. It's one of the reasons why we bounce around so much. If you make yourself really mindful and really alert, so that you see right through the movements of the mind, you begin to peel away a lot of these layers of film, and you find all kinds of things in the mind. For a while you just find that there's greed, aversion, and delusion in ways that you didn't really imagine or you didn't readily admit to yourself. But you keep on digging deeper and deeper, and peeling things away, and you finally do get to things of real value inside.

There's a sutta where a monk is meditating, and he gets a vision of some devas, so he asks them, "Where does the physical universe end? Earth, wind, fire, and water: How far so they go? Is there some place where you can get beyond them? Do they have a border beyond which you can go?" and the devas say, "Well, we don't know, but there are devas above us who may know." So he gets sent up level by level by level, through the deva bureaucracy, and finally gets to the Great Brahma. He asks the Great Brahma, "Where do these four elements end?" and the Great Brahma says, "I am the Great Brahma, knower of all, seer of all, creator of all that has been and will be." And the monk says, "That's not what I asked. I asked, 'Where do these four elements end?'" and the Great Brahma goes through the spiel again. Finally, after the third time, he pulls the monk aside by the elbow and says, "I don't know, but my entourage here would be very upset to think there's anything I didn't know. Go back to the Buddha and see what he has to say."

So the monk goes to the Buddha and the Buddha says, "You phrased the question wrongly—it's not where these things end, it's where they have no footing in the mind." In other words, instead of trying to go out and find the far boundary out there, you turn inside and look inside, and you find that there's an aspect of the mind where these things just cannot go, where they have no hold. That's what we're looking for.

So this path leads inward, but not to something small. It leads to something a lot bigger than these four elements. Even though they are huge—the windstorms and floods, forest fires, earthquakes can be enormous—what we're looking for inside is a lot bigger. So try to bring your thoughts, your words, and your deeds in line so that they do become a path. That way, if someone were to draw a map of your life, it wouldn't be just bouncing around. It would be going straight inside. That's where there's real harbor; that's where there's real safety.

So use the breath here as a path into that dimension, because that's where all suffering ends.