

# *Faith in the Buddha's Awakening*

*May 19, 2008*

Focus on your breath. Know when it's coming in, know when it's going out. And allow it to be comfortable going in and going out. Experiment to see what rhythm feels best right now. As you stay with the breath, you're staying in the same place where the Buddha was staying when he gained awakening on the full moon night in May more than 2,600 years ago. We're commemorating that night tonight. In fact we're commemorating three events in the Buddha's life. It was on the full moon night in May that he was born. And 35 years later on the full moon night in May, he gained awakening. And 45 years after that, on the full moon night in May, he passed away into total Nirvana.

It's good to remember these events because they help put our own lives into context. What did the Buddha prove on the night of his awakening? He proved that there is a true happiness that doesn't have to depend on conditions. It's not touched by aging, illness, or death. And he proved that this happiness can be found through human effort. Now the effort required qualities that were not special to the Buddha, qualities that we all share to some extent, simply that he had taken those qualities and developed them to their fullness.

And so what does this mean for our lives? There is that potential for true happiness and it can be found by developing qualities within the mind. This is why the beginning of the path is having faith in the Buddha's awakening. In other words, he can do it, we can do it. So when we pay homage to the Buddha, we are also paying homage to this potential within ourselves. We're showing respect for our desire for true happiness.

It's a good thing to show respect for, because the world tells us that that kind of happiness is impossible: "Don't even think about it. Buy our things. Pretend that they make you happy. Settle for a happiness that's fleeting and compromised." So you can ask yourself, what kind of potential do you want to respect? The potential for fleeting happiness based on material possessions, relationships, travel experiences, whatever? A happiness that comes and goes? We know it's going to go, so to enjoy it, we have to close our eyes to huge areas of life. Or are we going to look for an open-eyed happiness that admits the drawbacks of our worldly pleasures? Where we devote ourselves to the effort that's required to develop those qualities inside the mind? That's our choice.

What are those qualities? Well, they start with mindfulness and alertness, qualities we're developing right now. As we keep the breath in mind, that's mindfulness. And as we watch the breath, we also watch the mind to make sure it stays with the breath. That's alertness. If we catch it wandering off, then we bring with a quality called ardency, which means that as soon as we catch it wandering off, we bring it right back. While the mind is with the breath we try to be as sensitive as possible to the breathing. Think of the breathing as a whole body process. Your entire nervous system, from the top of the head down to the tips of the toes, every part of the body is involved to some extent with the breath. And think of the breath not just as the air coming in and out of the lungs, but also as the movement of energy throughout the body. Try to be sensitive to

that. As you're sensitive to it, use your powers of evaluation and observation to see what feels best, what kind of breathing feels gratifying throughout the body.

This is a good path to follow because it doesn't save all of its pleasures to the end. There is pleasure in the meditation. There is also the pleasure of knowing that the path doesn't ask anything ignoble of you. All the qualities you develop are good qualities of mind, noble qualities of mind, which is why they say that the Dhamma is good in the beginning, good in the middle, good in the end.

The quality of ardency is especially important. It's what helps the other good qualities of the mind grow. It's part of right effort. Right effort involves three issues. First is simply the amount of effort, the amount of effort that you're up for. There is a famous story of a monk who had been very delicately brought up. His life was so refined that hair was growing on the soles of his feet. He never walked on anything rough. So when he decided to ordain and was doing walking meditation on a sandy path, his feet started bleeding. He began to get discouraged. "Maybe," he said, "maybe I should disrobe. Go back and be a lay person." The Buddha saw what was going through his mind, so he appeared right in front of him. He said, "Are you thinking of disrobing?" The monk—his name was Sona—said Yes." And the Buddha said, "Sona, when you were a lay person, were you skilled at playing the lute?" Yes, he was. "And when you played the lute and the strings were too tight, did it sound good?" No. "When the strings were too loose, did it sound good?" No. "In the same way you have to tune your effort to what you're capable of: not too tight, not too loose, just right for what you can do.

That's the first issue in of right effort: exerting the amount of effort that's right for you right now. You have to gauge what's too much, what's too little. But it's not just any old effort. That's the next issue. The Buddha defines right effort as generating desire: You have to have the right attitude; you have to *want* to do it. In other words, you have to value the path, you have to value the goal. Sometimes when the practice gets dry you have to give yourself a good pep talk, remind yourself of why it's a good thing to do.

To do what? That's the third issue, which is the type of effort. If unskillful qualities based on sensuality, ill will, or cruelty, arise in the mind, you try to abandon them. If they haven't arisen, you do what you can to make sure they don't. In other words, you can anticipate sometimes that these things will arise, so you try to restrain yourself ahead of time. If you know that looking at something is going to give rise to greed, anger, delusion, lust, or fear, you don't look at it. Or you try to look at it in a different way so as to prevent those qualities from arising. As for skillful qualities, if they haven't arisen yet, you try to give rise to them. When they have arisen, you do what you can to develop them as fully as you can.

So there are four types of effort: abandoning unskillful qualities that have arisen, preventing unskillful qualities that haven't yet arisen, giving rise to skillful qualities and then developing them. So all in all, right effort has these three aspects: One, what's the right amount of effort you can handle right now? Two, what's the right attitude to learn how to give rise to desire so that you want—three—to develop good qualities, you want to abandon unskillful ones. Even though there are times when we take lust, anger, and greed to be our friends, we have to realize these are not our friends. They turn on us. They make us do

stupid things and then when we reap the results, they run away. If you had friends like that, you wouldn't hang around them very long. But here they arise in the mind, so you identify with them and you fall for them.

This is an important lesson in the path. Just because something arises in the mind doesn't mean that you have to follow it, that you have to believe it. As they say, don't believe everything you think. Try to develop qualities that are your friends, that will lead you to do things that you will be proud to have done. Qualities like mindfulness, alertness. Or the qualities that are traditionally associated with the Buddha: wisdom, compassion, and purity. These qualities may seem far away, but as the Buddha points out, they can be developed simply by taking true happiness seriously. Wisdom begins with the question: What when I do it will lead to my long-term welfare and happiness? That question is wise because you realize that happiness depends on your actions. You can't just sit and hope for it to come floating by, or expect your Buddha nature to suddenly arise and do everything for you. You have to create the causes. And then you realize that long-term happiness is better than short-term. That's how wisdom begins. As the Buddha once said, when you see an abundant happiness that comes from sacrificing a lesser happiness, you should be willing to sacrifice that lesser happiness for the greater one.

It sounds obvious but when you look at the way people live their lives, it's as if they'd never heard of this idea. Everyone goes running for the quick fix. So always try to keep in mind that the long-term happiness is the one that's worthwhile.

Then you reflect on the fact that if you want your happiness to last, it can't depend on the suffering of other people, because they want happiness too. So you have to keep their happiness, their well-being in mind. At the very least, make sure that your happiness doesn't oppress them. That's the beginning of compassion.

And finally purity is the willingness to look at your actions and see if they actually do lead to true happiness. Before you act, try to anticipate the results. If you anticipate any harm, don't act in that particular way. If you don't anticipate harm, go ahead and do it. While you're doing it, watch to see what actual results come, because sometimes your actions give immediate results. If you see that they're harmful, you stop. If not, go ahead, continue with the action. Finally, once the action is done, reflect on the longer term results. And if you see that they caused harm, go talk it over with someone you respect and resolve not repeat that action. As the Buddha said, this is how you purify your actions—so what you do and say and think actually does lead to true happiness.

So all these qualities of the Buddha—wisdom, compassion, and purity—come from the simple principle of taking your true happiness seriously. You'd think that would be what we would all want to do: to take our true happiness seriously. But again you look around and it's very rare. This is why it's useful to think about the Buddha, his example. This is why having faith in his awakening, that he really did it, and the happiness he found really was true, is such an important motivation in the practice. We can't know that for ourselves until we put his path into practice. This is why it requires a sense of conviction. Some of the results we can see along the way, but the ultimate result comes only after we've learned how to apply this principle of right effort.

So take the Buddha's awakening as your working hypothesis. And as you show respect for the Buddha, remember you're also showing respect for your desire for true happiness. And it's a good kind of respect. When you think of all the other things in the world that you could respect, this is really the most worthwhile.