

## *A Well-thatched Roof*

*April, 2003*

Every time we have a rainy night like this, I think of a passage in the *Theragatha*, where a monk is sitting in his hut, and it's raining, and he is saying my hut is well thatched, there are no leaks in the roof, so go ahead and rain as much as you want to, rain. And, of course, it's a symbolic statement. The monk is saying that he has his mind developed to a state that where no matter what happens outside--and "outside" here means any areas of the khandhas, the body or feelings or perceptions whatever—there is a part of his mind that's untouched. It's well protected from the changes of things outside.

That's what the meditation is all about: finding that part of the mind, developing it, developing the qualities that open you up to something that's totally beyond the touch of space and time. As the Canon says, the highest blessing is that when touched by the ways of the world the mind doesn't shake, the mind isn't affected. Gain and loss, status and loss of status, criticism and praise, pleasure and pain: Those are the ways of the world, and they rain down with more than just water. All kinds of things can come raining down on you, and if your mind isn't protected, you're totally exposed. It's like having a leaky roof: The rain comes and goes right through the roof, and after a while the roof becomes meaningless.

So we want to develop the mind so that no matter what happens, it has a firm basis for a sense of inner well-being. This requires both tranquility and insight. Often we think of these two as different practices, but when you look at the Buddha's words on the topic, you see that these are two qualities of the mind that you develop through the single practice of meditation. You can focus on the breath, you can focus on any of the topics of meditation, and to do it right requires both tranquility and insight. As you get more settled in your object of meditation, the tranquility and the insight get stronger. So the practice of concentration involves both. Concentration is not just a tranquility meditation. It requires some insight. You have to look at what you're doing, gauge what you're doing, figure out ways of fending off distractions, figuring out ways of how you're going to deal with pain in the body, how you're going to deal with distracting thoughts, at least to the extent that you can clear a space in the mind where you can actually focus on the breath and stay there, so that when distracting thoughts come through, they do just that: They go right through. They don't leave any traces. It is like wind going through a screen on a window. It doesn't get stuck in the screen, it just keeps going right through.

So as you're focusing on the breath, realize that you have to bring both of these qualities: the tranquility, the stillness; and the insight, seeing what's actually going on. The two of them together are necessary. The Buddha says if you have one without the other, then you have to remedy the situation, and emphasize the one that's lacking, ask yourself the right questions until you bring both into balance. The question in terms of tranquility is how to get the mind to stay with the breath, to stay with one object. This means learning how to adjust your focus, learning how to adjust the breath, so it's a good comfortable solid place to stay.

At the same time there has to be certain amount of understanding, this is what the insight is. When distractions come in, you can fend off only so many simply through an act of will. It requires the realization that (1) you've left your object; (2) the mind is going off in a direction you don't want it to go; and (3) you have ways of bringing it back. That requires insight. Sometimes it's simply a matter realizing that you've left the breath: That's enough to alert you to what's happening. You come right back. Other times, you have to deal in a little bit more detail with the distraction so that you realize it's just that, a distraction. It's something you've fabricated, and you want to see it as fabrication so you can let it go. Those are the questions for insight: how to see these things as fabrication and develop dispassion for them.

Sometimes you can develop dispassion by realizing that the distraction is nothing more than an old movie that's come through your head many, many times. You know where it's going, and it certainly is not going to take you to any place really new, unlike the meditation. You remind yourself: This is old stuff coming back again. You don't need to go there again. You know where it's taking you, and it's nowhere you want to go. You can drop it.

Sometimes the mind will complain, "This particular thought hasn't been finished yet, let's take it all the way to the end." You don't have to finish these things. Leave them unfinished, just let them go in bits and pieces and fragments. The real completion you want in the meditation is the completion of getting the mind to stay with the breath. So you figure out ways of bringing back the mind, so that you don't feel like you're being manhandled. If you feel manhandled coming back to the breath, you're not going to want to stay there. Find ways of making the breath interesting; find ways of making the breath attractive. Find ways of being gentle but firm with the mind, so that you can bring it back and it's willing to stay there without feeling confined, without feeling tied down to breath, but more with a sense the breath is a place you want to come to. You want to be here.

So this, in the beginning level, is how tranquility and insight work together. You have to understand what you're doing. There has to be a purpose to what you're doing. Sometimes people say you have to meditate without any purpose, without any sense of the goal, no sense of attainment; well then, why meditate? There are so many things in the world that need to be done, why do something that doesn't have any purpose? Of course the meditation has a purpose. You simply have to learn how to live with a goal in a way that's mature, so you can actually get the results you want, instead of having your desire for attainment get in the way of the actual attainment. You learn how to adjust it so that it's helpful.

Having a clear sense of the advantages of what you're doing: This is an important part of the practice, it's an important part of the insight, realizing that it does make a difference whether you allow the mind to wander off or bring it back to the object of your meditation. Because wanderings: Those are just the mind's old habits. The meditation is actually meant to take you someplace new. It's only by staying with the breath, sticking with it, giving it a chance to develop, giving these little bits and pieces of concentration a chance so that they can grow: This is the only way you're going to experience anything new in the meditation. As the Buddha said, it's for the purpose of seeing what you've never seen before, attaining what you've never attained before, realizing what you've never realized before. It's not simply a matter of learning how to accept what's already there. It's more a matter of realizing that you've got certain potentials here that have to be developed if you really want to get the most out of them. The acceptance comes in accepting the point where you are right now.

Some people, when they get started on the meditation, see how far they are away from anything that could remotely resembled awakening or freedom from stress and suffering, and they get discouraged. They'd like to be much closer before they actually attempt it. Well things don't work out that way. You have to start where you are: Accept that fact. That's where the acceptance is useful. But you can't accept the idea that you can just stay right here and that what you are is already good enough, because it's obviously not good enough. There is suffering going on. The Buddha says there's the possibility to end suffering, and you don't get there simply by saying, well, I'm just going to lower my standards and learn how to accept what is already there. That's not an act of kindness at all. Kindness to yourself is devoting your energies in the direction that really will be helpful, that really will offer returns on the effort that you put in to the practice. That's kindness. That's really wishing yourself well in a way that's wise.

So what have we got here that we have to accept? We've got the body sitting here breathing; we've got the mind thinking and aware. If you learn how to put those things together, keep them together, and understand what makes them tend to go their separate ways, then you're developing tranquility, which is keeping things together, along with insight, which is to learn what's going on, the mechanism of cause and effect, and how it works in the present moment. When you have those qualities working together—simply the thinking and awareness as they are applied to the breath, as you keep them with the breath—they turn into mindfulness and alertness. From mindfulness and alertness, they turn into directed thought and evaluation. These are the factors of jhana. Keep them with the breath, and you can get into deeper and deeper levels of jhana.

Realize that you've got these seeds here, and that when you give them the proper conditions, they grow. You keep the seed in one place in the ground. You bring along sunlight, you bring water, fertilizer, and the seed will grow. If you plant the seed and then dig it up, and the plant it again, and dig up again, it never grows. Or if it's separated from the soil, separated from the sunlight, separated from the fertilizer, it won't grow either. You've got to bring all these things together.

The seed is the alertness, mindfulness is the water, the body here is the soil and the sunlight. You can adjust those analogies anyway you like, but the basic idea is that you bring them all together, and you keep them there, and you're very careful not to take any these things apart or let them start going their separate ways. It's when they stay together that you get a chance to understand how they interact, how they can grow, and how they can help one another.

This way, these little bits and pieces of random awareness begin to coalesce, and as they coalesce they become something solid and valuable. They give the mind the kind of grounding it needs. When they all stay together, they develop a kind of protective energy. It's almost like an energy field that surrounds the still mind. This gives you a beginning sense of what it might be like to have that kind of roof that no rain can penetrate—that no matter how much it's raining, nothing can come in.

So the real act of kindness is not simply saying, I think I'll accept the way I am and not demand too much of myself. Genuine kindness is realizing where the seeds are, where the potentials are in what you've got right here in the present moment: these little moments of mindfulness, these little moments of alertness. The kindness lies in making the effort to learn how to put them together so they can grow and really benefit you and the people around you.

Work on keeping these things together so that insight and tranquility help each other, or mindfulness, alertness, and the breath all help one another, because if they go their separate ways they're unsupported. They have no chance to grow. It's when they're together that they can grow, they can sprout into something really valuable and useful right here in the mind.