

## *Laying the Infrastructure*

*Thanissaro Bhikkhu*

*January 12, 2004*

Try to be as sensitive as possible to the breath. Get down to the details of the breath, because the more sensitive you are to this one thing, the more you develop the quality of discernment that we're aiming at. And keep your eyes on the road. In other words, don't anticipate where you're going to go with this. Just keep following the steps, step by step, and the causes will take care of the results. It's not the case that by imagining results you're going to get the causes to go in that direction. If that were the case, Right Imagination would be one of the steps on the path. But it's not.

What you want to do is develop the path, develop Right View. So concentration, mindfulness—all the elements of the Eightfold Path—are things to be developed. And where do you find the things to be developed? They're right here, right in front of your nose. That's where the work is to be done—not in your anticipation of where you're going to go, but in paying really close attention to the breath right here and now. This is your path. If you spend all your time looking off to the horizon to see the big mountain we're headed to, you lose sight of where you're going and drive off the side of the road or crash into somebody, and you never get there.

It's by following the path that the path develops. It's by focusing your attention of the breath—getting really, really sensitive right here—that your sensitivity is going to take you where you want to go. Because the sensitivity involves not only very clear perception, but also continuity. If you really want to be sensitive to something, you've got to watch it continuously and not go skipping around.

Think of a needle on a record: When the needle stays in the groove, you hear the music on the record. If the needle goes jumping around, then all you get are screeches and scratches, and they don't make any sense at all. And it certainly isn't music. It's by staying in the groove and by following each little squiggle that the record player delivers the music.

So be very sensitive to the little squiggles in your breath. Keep tabs on this one level of your awareness. As you get more sensitive to the present moment, you begin to notice that there are lots of different things you could focus on, and your ability to stay focused on this one thing in the midst of everything else is what makes the difference. It's not like you're trying to blot out or be oblivious to

those other things. It's simply that you keep track of this one level of awareness, this one level of sensation that you've got right here.

It's like a radio tuning into a station: The radio waves for all the stations in the San Diego and Los Angeles area are coming through this room right now, but when you have a radio you choose which one you want to listen to. The rest are still going through the radio, but you don't tune in to them. So try to stay tuned in to the breath and resist the temptation to go wandering after other things.

And you'll find all kinds of things to distract you. Some of them are obvious, like the chattering going through your mind. You don't have to do anything with that chatter. Just make sure that the main member of your committee is right here. As for the other members of the committee, they can be off in the corner talking about whatever they want to, but you don't have to silence them. If you don't pay attention to them, after a while they'll fall silent on their own. Otherwise, if you keep running back and forth between the breath and trying to stop this thought and stop that thought, the breath gets abandoned, and so instead of being concentrated on the breath, you find yourself running around.

There's a children's game I saw once in a department store in Japan. In the department stores there they have game arcades up on the top floor, where the children can play while their mothers are shopping. One of the games depicted a set of holes in the ground out in the American prairie. Every now and then a plastic prairie dog would pop up out of one of the holes, and you were given a plastic mallet to hit the prairie dog on the head. And of course you spent your time crazy with all these prairie dogs popping up here, popping up there. Kids loved it, of course, but it wasn't a concentration-inducing game.

So don't go out hitting all the prairie dogs on the head. Stay right here with your breath. The prairie dogs will pop up from one hole and then another hole, and then they'll go away; and they'll pop up again and then go away again, but you don't have to go around hitting them. Just stay with this one focus on the breath.

There'll be other distractions, too. There'll be pains in the body here and there, but you don't have to focus on them. Try to make the breath as comfortable as possible. You can let the pain have whichever part of the body it's going to have. You don't have to get involved. As you're working on the comfortable breath at one spot, eventually you'll be able to spread the comfortable breath energy from that spot out throughout the body, right through the pain. That will help take away a lot of the discomfort, a lot of the tension, a lot of the sense that you can't stand it. But in order to do that you've got to work on your foundation right here. So, again, stay with the breath.

Feelings of energy, rapture will come up sometimes. Again, stay with the breath. You know the feeling of energy and rapture is there, but you don't have

to get involved with it. You can't take that as your object. You have to stay with the breath as your object all the time. Some people say that once the mind begins to settle down, you drop the breath and stay with the feeling of mental pleasure. Well, if you do that you've abandoned your foundation and you can easily get lost wandering off someplace else. You want to stay right here with the breath. Whether the things that come up in the body strike you as good or bad, you stay with the breath as your foundation. As Ajaan Fuang once said, "This is the basis for all of our skills." Don't abandon the basis.

If the energy gets too strong, just think of it going out the palms of your hands, the soles of your feet. Don't try to hold it in. That way you find it easier actually to stay with the breath and to get to a more refined level of breathing, a more refined sense of the body.

Visions may come up. You may see a light. You may actually see faces or events—and those may be signs that your mind is beginning to settle down. But think of driving down a road: When you drive down the road and see a sign that says, "Entering Valley Center," you don't get up and drive on the sign. You stay on the road. Whatever comes up in the meditation, especially as the mind begins to settle down and distorts its sensation of the body – sometimes the body feels really big, sometimes really small – you know that that's happening, but you don't make it your focus. You keep your focus on the sensation of the breathing, because what you want to do here is to develop a really strong foundation.

All kinds of things can come up in the meditation, and if you don't have a foundation, they can knock you away. Not just the obvious distractions, like distracted thinking. Any of the obstacles—some of the seemingly positive things that are signs that the mind is beginning to settle down or things that happen in the body or the mind as the mind begins to settle down: You don't want them to distract you, either. You're working on your ability to stick with one thing no matter what else happens. And again, it's not that you're denying the experience of those other things. It's simply that you're able to maintain your focus in the midst of all the activity around you. This is the ability that will give rise to discernment: this ability to stay right here with your foundation.

You begin to see thoughts come and go as if you were watching them from outside. It used to be that you would take on those thoughts almost like a coat that was handed to you: You put on the coat and it became your coat. You were inside it. But this time, instead of taking it on, you sit very still and watch the thought come, watch it go, so that it doesn't take over the mind.

Any thoughts of boredom, impatience, or anticipation about what this is going to be, what that's going to be, sudden insights that spring up in the mind: You have to watch out for those, too. Sometimes they're true, sometimes they're false. It's like what the tracking books "fox-walking": You don't place the weight

on your forward foot until you really know that your forward foot is in a good place to support your weight. So you try to keep your weight on the back foot, where you already are. You stay with the breath. Whatever comes up, you watch it. And only if it looks like a good thing to follow, then you try. But even then you have to be very careful. The best thing, especially in the beginning, is to regard everything aside from the breath as someplace you don't want to go, and that way you can maintain your foundation.

We tend to think of insight practice and concentration practice as two separate things. But where does the insight practice come from if it doesn't have this good foundation of stillness? After all, it's only when you're still that you can see subtle things move. So the time spent on concentration, being very careful to watch this very mundane thing, the breath—coming in, going out, getting familiar with it, getting to have a sense of being at home with it, getting it to be comfortable—is not wasted time. It's time spent working on your foundation.

Remember that the taller buildings require deeper foundations, and you're here working on a building that's really tall. So you've got to dig down deeply into the bedrock so that when the time does come to build that building, it's not going to fall over. Only when the mind is really still can it really see. Only when it has a solid, unwavering foundation in the breath can it see other things moving in the mind.

It's like running a very subtle experiment that requires very precise measurements: You want to make sure that the building you're in has a solid foundation; the table on which the instruments are placed is solid and not liable to rock. Only when everything is solidly based can you trust the measurements. But if the table wobbles or if the building doesn't really have a good foundation, then no matter how precise your equipment, you can't trust the results of the experiment, you can't trust the measurements, because all you may be measuring is just the wobbling of the table or the settling of the building.

So stay right here. Only by burrowing into this point, really getting sensitive to what's going on at this point, can you gain insight. Remember the three knowledges the Buddha gained on the night of his Awakening. The first knowledge was about his own past lives. The second knowledge was about the dying and rebirth of all the beings in the cosmos. Those weren't the knowledges that gave him Awakening, though. They pointed him in the right direction, because the second knowledge pointed to the question of karma, of views and intentions: the actions of beings, the views under which they acted. This is what inspired the Buddha to turn around and look at his actions and views in the present moment. He got very sensitive to what was going on in the present moment. "What does it mean to experience the present moment? Is it something

you passively watch or is it something you shape? And if you shape it, can you catch yourself shaping it? What happens if you reach a point of equilibrium where there's no shaping, there's no intention at all? What does that do?"

Where did the Buddha see these things? Right here in the present moment, because he was very sensitive right here. And he wasn't thinking about getting to universal compassion or universal emptiness or universal equanimity or anything, he just wanted to understand the present moment, really see what was going on. And it was in seeing what was going on that made everything open up in a way that was really stable, solid, safe, and secure.

Of course, it's possible to have great Technicolor experiences in your meditation, but if they're not well founded they can actually do more harm than good. Some of these dimensions can leave the mind really frazzled, at the end of its rope. Or it can open up for the time being to certain dimensions, tune in to a radio station that it's never heard before, that has some really fantastic music. But if your radio can't stay tuned to a particular station, you don't want to go there. It just flips in, flips out, and can be very disorienting.

So what you want is to be really stable. It may not be as exciting as the Technicolor movies, it may not be as dramatic or glamorous, but it really delivers the goods. One of the qualities I noticed immediately when I started spending time around the Thai Forest Tradition, getting to know the ajaans, was that they all had their feet firmly planted on the ground. They were no-nonsense, matter-of-fact, down-to-earth people. And this quality of being down-to-earth was what helped guarantee the stability and safety of the practice they were following, so that the insights they gained were not shrouded in a cloud of denial or in some never-never land. They were firmly grounded in the present moment—actually, in something deeper than the present moment but that's found in the present moment. And the quality of groundedness was their guarantee. When unusual things did happen in the meditation, they were grounded in their ability to gauge those events to see what was useful and what wasn't, what was reliable, what was not.

So when we're dealing with our own minds, that groundedness is the quality we want. Awakening, when it comes, is not a disorienting experience. It's the exact opposite. It makes you even more grounded, better oriented: oriented to the Deathless. And so the path to take you there has to be a grounded path as well.

What this means is that we're working on a foundation. Foundation work is not necessarily glamorous work. Look here at the monastery, with all the infrastructure work that has to go down into the ground: It's very difficult to get donations for underground pipes, underground electricity systems, but it's essential. The infrastructure under the ground is what everything else is based

on. It may not be glamorous, but that's what guarantees that everything else is going to work.

So as we're meditating here we're working on infrastructure. And even though the people who work on infrastructure don't have the most glamorous jobs, the most sought after social position, it's because of them that society can function. It's because of this infrastructure work that you're doing right now: This is what's going to make your meditation work. So have the pride of a craftsman, because this is the kind of work upon which everything else depends.