

Stay Tuned

October 9, 2007

Try to tune in on the breath. There are different ways you can do this. You can start out by thinking about the breath. You might have a mental picture with the energy flowing through the body, around the body. Or you can tune in to the feeling of the breath. Like a vapor of alcohol, it can't be contained. It has no clear or boundaries. It flows through the body, around the body. So allow your mind to tune in to the lightness of the breath in the same way that you tune a radio to a specific station. This is called tuning in to the level of form.

The mind can experience three levels of becoming. There's the level of sensuality, where you're focused on your desire for sights, sounds, smells, tastes, or tactile sensations. There's the level of form, which is primarily your inner sensation of the body—how the body feels from inside—and this is defined in four terms: in terms of the breath, in terms of earth, water, fire. In other words, breath is a sense of motion or energy; earth is the solidity; water is the coolness, the liquid sensations; and fire is the warmth. That's form. Then there is the formless level, which covers things like space or awareness.

And you can tune in to any of these. They are here all the time. It's a question of which one you choose to focus on, which one you want to stay with. It's like setting up a TV set, an AM/FM radio, and a short-wave radio here in the sala. You realize there are lots of waves coming through the sala right now. The TV-station waves, the AM/FM radio waves, the short waves, and you could choose to tune in to any of them. They're all here. It's simply a question of which one you are going to choose. And our minds tend to be channel surfers. We jump from one to the other, sometimes TV, sometimes radio, different channels, different radio stations. If we keep jumping around like this, we just pick up bits and snatches of things. We don't hear or see anything all the way through.

This is why we have to choose to stay consistently with one level of becoming. So let's focus on the body in and of itself, the sensation of having a body here right now, the sensation of warmth, coolness, motion, solidity. Try to stay focused on that level. Any images or sensations or notions from other levels, just let them go, let them pass. They are going to be here, but you don't have to focus on them. Stay consistently with a sense of the body, how you're feeling it from the inside. And hang on right there.

As we do this, we're creating a state of becoming. That's what the path is all about. You create the path, you bring it into being. This is one of the paradoxes of the Buddha's whole teaching. On the one hand we're trying to overcome craving for becoming, which is one of the causes of suffering. But the path we follow is one that brings something into being. We do some becoming, but it's a tactical sort of thing. As you stay consistently with the breath, you start to understand things better, you see things more clearly. It's like tuning in to one channel, or one radio station, and just staying there. If there's music, you hear the piece all the way through. If there's a discussion, you hear the discussion from beginning to end. In other words, you know things all the way from cause to effect. That's how you give rise to the discernment that will set you free.

The Buddha uses a different analogy. Of course in those days they didn't have radio stations, so his analogy is planting a seed in a field. The field here is your karma. The fact that you've got a body sitting here right now, that's a result of past karma. The seed is your consciousness, your awareness. And for any seed to grow, of course, you've got to plant it in

one place. You don't move it around. Planting it here today, then digging it up tomorrow, moving it someplace else, you'll never get the plant you want. So you stay in one place. And then once the seed is in place, you water it. You water it with delight.

In other words, the practice of concentration has to be something you like to do. This is why it's important when you meditate, when you're trying to develop a state of concentration, that you choose an object you like. Or you can take the most common object, which is the breath, and you *make* it into something you like. In that way the state of becoming grows. So the field here is the sense of the body from within, the seed of consciousness is focused on one spot in the body. The essence of what it means to have a state of becoming is that you choose a location to stay focused. And because you want this one to develop, you don't go channel surfing. You don't go moving your seed around along with your mood. You choose a place and then stick with it, and then you water it with delight.

In the beginning, the delight is simply the sense of interest that comes from exploring what it feels like to inhabit the body, what this breath energy is that we keep talking about, what's earth, what's water, what's fire. It sounds like primitive chemistry but it's not. It's more like giving us a vocabulary to help you see and describe things inside, the same way that professional tasters need a detailed vocabulary to describe all the variations of taste. The more complete your vocabulary, the more you start seeing, the more you start sensing.

It's the same with the breath, and the same with all the elements of body. Try to use this vocabulary as a way of classifying the different sensations you feel, as you explore the body from within. What's the difference between breath sensations say, as opposed to liquid sensations? The more precisely you can detect the breath in this way, the more precisely you can choose the right point to focus. Then you just plant your seed right there. In other words, you stay right there. You don't move around.

Then try to develop your sense of delight by exploring how you can make the breath energy feel good in the different parts of the body, how you can use the breath energy to soothe away pains, tension, or tightness in different parts of the body. In this way, the delight turns into not simply interest, but a sense of real pleasure, gratification from being on this level of form.

And try to establish a sense of oneness with the breath. This is important. When the Buddha describes the different levels of jhana, he talks about singleness of preoccupation as being common to all of them. In other words, you're focused on one thing, but your relationship to the object changes. In the first jhana you're thinking about the object, and you're evaluating it. So even though you're with one object, there's not yet a sense of being totally one with it. The mind is hovering around it, trying to adjust it, trying to get it so that it's really just right.

Then, when it's just right, you go into it. You enter into the breath. Your sense of awareness, your consciousness, is firmly planted in the soil. Your awareness is firmly planted in the breath. You feel like you're surrounded by breath, you're one with the breath. And then you try to maintain that sense of oneness. You don't have to think much about it, you don't have to evaluate much anymore. Just stay with that sense of oneness. The breath will start changing. It'll grow more calm, more balanced throughout the body, until the breath energy throughout the whole body feels like one single connected sensation, as it grows more and more still.

You take this sense of oneness and then you can apply it to other things, like space. This is where you move into the formless realms: the infinitude of space, the infinitude of consciousness -- that's as far as the oneness can take you. Then you have to drop the

oneness to get to the state of nothingness. In other words, the oneness of the knowing gets put aside. This is how you tune in to the formless realms.

So you start by trying to take this seed of your awareness and planting it very firmly in the sense of the body, just in and of itself, as you're experiencing it from within. Give rise to the state of becoming right here, on the level of form. Or, to switch back to the radio analogy, stay tuned to this station. Even though there may be other waves going through the air, other waves going through the building, you're going to stay on this frequency, so that the mind moves in unison with this frequency. The longer you stay here, the better chance you have of seeing things clearly.

This is why we have to bring the state of becoming into being. This is why the path, even though it ultimately leads beyond becoming, has to make use of becoming to go beyond. Because while you do this, you start understanding: "What is the process of becoming? What is this karma that forms the field? What is the consciousness that forms the seed? What's the delight that keeps it watered? And because you're still, you can see these things in action. You can see the slightest movements of the mind. When there's a sense of ease and well-being, the mind begins to open up, so that whatever insights it gains go really deep and change things inside. But your duty for now is to stay tuned, stay planted right here. Learn how to take delight in the station you're tuned to, take delight in the fact that you're on the right path, because that delight is what makes the path grow.