

Freedom

September 1, 2006

We've got a whole hour now to focus totally on the breath. There's nothing else you have to think about, there are no other responsibilities, just be with the breath. Notice how it feels when it comes in, notice how it feels when it goes out. Notice which parts the body are involved in the breathing process, and which ones aren't. See if it feels comfortable. If it doesn't feel comfortable, you're free to change it. You can make the breath longer, shorter, deep, more shallow, heavier, lighter. If you're feeling sleepy, you might want to try good, long in-breaths and short out-breaths. It may not be comfortable, but it'll wake you up. Or if you're feeling tense, you might want to try short in-breaths and long out-breaths. Think of the tension in your body dissolving away as you breathe out.

In other words, you can give your full attention to the breath right now. Nothing else is asked of you. And you can look at this hour as an hour of freedom or as an hour of restriction. It depends on your point of view. The freedom is that you have no other responsibilities. All the thoughts and cares about your job, about your family, about all the things that the mind weighs itself down with: You don't have to think about those things at all. That's the freedom. The restriction is that you're asked to stay with one topic, the breath. When you compare the two, the freedom is more important. In the course of making the most of that freedom, you develop a lot of skill. Any area of your life where you can devote your full attention to it is an area that can become skillful.

This is a pattern you see throughout the Buddha's teachings. As he once said, the essence or the core of his teaching is freedom or release. The goal is nibbāna: unbinding, total happiness. So freedom and happiness are the big themes here. Yet you look around and what do you see? You see monks having to abide by a very strict code of rules. You're sitting here and there may be pains in your legs, pains in the back, pains in your stomach, that come from sitting in a single position for an hour. You may say, "Okay, where's the freedom? Where's the happiness?"

Again, it depends on how you look at it. As the Buddha noticed, most of our happiness has its downside as well. Sometimes the things we do to gain happiness make us suffer further down the line, sometimes they make us suffer right here in the present moment, but we've learned to block that suffering out of our awareness, so we miss it. At the same time, our happiness often place burdens on other people as well.

Look at the fact you've got a body: It has to eat. It needs clothing, shelter, medicine. All these things involve suffering of some sort or another for other people, other beings. And that's just basic survival. You can also think of all the types of happiness that people pursue that can create all kinds of suffering. There are people who want to wage war. It makes it them happy to wage war. It's really strange, the places where the human mind looks for happiness.

The Buddha was looking for a higher standard of happiness, a happiness that causes no suffering to anybody. "Is this possible?" he said. And he set out to see if it was. When he found the way, he brought it out to teach us. Now, the way is, you might say, a narrow way. There are a lot of things you can't do as you follow his teachings. You can't steal. You can't kill. Can't have illicit sex. Can't lie. Can't take intoxicants. And that's just on the outside level. When you practice meditation, you've got to learn how to be very, very precise with the mind, very attentive, very heedful about what you're doing. You can't focus on extraneous things.

This may seem like a restriction, but the Buddha is focusing your attention in an area where you can find a happiness that doesn't cause any suffering to anybody. He's setting a high standard for happiness. He isn't like the sort of teacher in high school who would just let you get away with anything. You may have liked those teachers at the time, but afterwards you realize you didn't learn anything from them. There were also the teachers who would force you to do a lot of work, but you didn't learn much anything, aside from the fact you could do a lot of work. But then there were the teachers who got you to do better work than you'd never done before. They were demanding. You may not have liked them at the time, but when you look back at it, those are the teachers you learned the most from. They got the best work out of you.

That's the kind of teacher the Buddha was. He raised the standard for his students. He said, if you work harder, but not only harder, but with more precision, more skill, focus your attention on areas that really are conducive to true happiness, you will someday come the point where you reach the happiness he talked about, a happiness that causes no suffering to anybody because it's not dependent on any conditions at all. It's a happiness that doesn't require any activity.

Now, to get that does require activity, but no activity is needed to maintain it. It's outside of space and time. That's the kind of freedom the Buddha was ultimately talking about. Meanwhile, we that the freedom to follow this very precise path that leads to true happiness. It may not be all that spontaneous, it

may not offer wide leeway for all the things you want to do, but then there is the question: What is true freedom?

Ajaan Suwat was commenting one time on one of the monasteries here in Los Angeles where the monks have figured out all kinds of clever ways to bring more people in and to get more money out of them. Some of the lay people here had been complaining that we weren't getting the crowd they were. He made the comment that it wasn't that he couldn't think about ways of pulling people in or getting more money out of them, "But just at the thought of doing that," he said, "I feel ashamed."

So it's not that his mind didn't have the ability to think in those ways. It's just that he didn't see that as useful, worthwhile, or anything he really wanted to do. So you might say that he was not free to act in shameful ways—but is that what we want out of freedom? No, we want the kind of freedom it shows us a way to happiness that really is reliable.

Notice how he used the word "shame" there. It wasn't that he was ashamed of himself, that he was a bad person. He was ashamed of the particular idea of doing certain things because they were beneath them. He knew better.

The Buddha makes a lot of use of this feeling. It's a healthy kind of shame. It's a shame that comes not from a low opinion of yourself, but from a high opinion, that you're not going to be content with just any old happiness or any old pleasure. You're going to content yourself only with a pleasure that doesn't cause any harm, a pleasure or happiness that doesn't require constant maintenance, constant upkeep.

So as you tread the path, keep reminding yourself of where true freedom lies. You're free to find a way to a really special happiness. That kind of freedom is worth more than anything else in the world. You may have to give up other freedoms to attain that higher freedom, but when you look carefully at them, you realize those other freedoms weren't really free at all. You could be free to do something harmful, but then it would get you involved in a long cycle of retribution. You're free to stick your hand into a trap; you're free to get stuck in a machine that's going to pull you in, pull you in, pull you in. But is that what you want to do with your freedom?

A much better way of understanding freedom is that you're free to find true happiness. A lot of the world doesn't feel that it has that freedom at all. In fact, there are a lot of people in the world who don't want *you* to look for that kind of freedom. They say, "Don't set your sights on that. It's impossible. Buy out things. Help keep the economy going," as if that were the highest thing you could aspire

to. The Buddha said, no, you're free to aspire to something higher: a kind of freedom that's really worthwhile, that really deserves to be called free.

So do your best to explore the freedom you've got for this hour. See what you can do with this opportunity.