

## *Independent Values*

*October 14, 2006*

Let all your other thoughts and concerns drop away for the time being. It's time to give the mind some time to be its own self, not be pushed around by outside events. Focus on your breath. Know when it's coming in, know when it's going out. Try to remember that. This quality is called mindfulness. Try to be with each breath. If you find yourself forgetting and wandering off, just come right back.

To catch yourself that way requires another quality, which is called alertness: Watch over the breath to see how it feels, and watch over your mind to make sure it's here.

If it wanders off, bring it right back. While you're with the breath, try to be sensitive to how your breath feels. Doing this requires a third quality: ardency.

This is how you establish a foundation for yourself in the present moment. The mind that gets pushed around is a mind that doesn't have a foundation. You try to find places for the mind to establish its happiness but they crumble away. You try wealth, but wealth doesn't work. Relationships: Relationships don't work. They change.

So the question is: Where can the mind settle down to a happiness that lasts? The best place is right here in the present moment. If you try to establish a happiness based on the past, the past is gone. As for the future, the future isn't here yet. So stay right here and try be at home right here.

This means allowing the breath be comfortable. If you notice that the way you're breathing is not comfortable, you can change. You find that some ways of breathing put you to sleep, other ways of breathing make you tense and irritable. If you find that happening, change the rhythm of your breath so that it feels just right: not too long, not too short, not too deep, not too shallow. Experiment a bit to see what feels best. Do your best to develop this foundation right here.

When you have this foundation in the present moment, then you have some room for independence. You learn to make the mind more and more self-reliant so that it can find happiness inside and doesn't have to go depending on people outside. And it can find happiness out of the simplest things. If your happiness depends on a lot of money, that's an insecure happiness, because the value of money depends on a complex web of relationships. If it depends on having a lot of friends, it's an insecure happiness. In other words, the more things you depend on, the more insecure your happiness. You will find there's a skill where you can

develop a happiness that doesn't require a lot, and you'll want to cultivate that skill, because that's more and more secure.

So this isn't much here, just the breath coming in and going out. It's a very basic function of any body that's alive. It keeps the body and mind together. If you can develop a happiness based on that, you're really in good shape, because then you can go anywhere and you've got all you need for happiness. But as with any skill, it takes time. But also as with any skill, the wider your range of skills, the more options you have.

One of our problems as we grow up as human beings is that we have a very limited range of skills for dealing with pain, for dealing with disappointment, for dealing with change outside. We keep running to the same old approaches over and over again. Sometimes they work; sometimes they don't. The more skills you have, again, the better the position you're in. The more you can learn how to make out of the breath, the better the position you're in as well, because the breath is always with you. As long as you're alive, it's right here. And you're perfectly free to breathe in any way you want. Nobody's forcing us to breathe in an uncomfortable way, and yet we often allow it to happen because we're distracted. We're focusing our attention on other things, so we don't see the potential of the breath: that it really can provide a soothing energy throughout the whole body.

When the breath feels comfortable, think of that that sense of comfort spreading out, seeping out, permeating the whole body. Then see if you can maintain that. It requires a sense of balance, so that you're not pushing it too much or pushing it too little. Try to sense what's just right. This may take time, but as with all good things, it's time well spent.

This way, you become more self-reliant, more independent. A lot of the old issue of true happiness lies around this ability to be independent, to be self-reliant. We were talking today about what they call the topics of noble conversation. And the first five—which create a system of values that's very different from the normal system of values in society—are designed to create just the right mental attitude.

The first one is modesty. Our society as a whole prizes people who are assertive, who present a good portrait of themselves to other people, but when you're modest, it's based on the realization that what good you have is really your own business. Other people don't have to know. If you advertise it, you spoil it. So whatever good inside you have, you don't have to go advertising it.

One of the other good qualities you develop is contentment. That allows you to let go of whatever physical situation you're in, and you realize, "Okay, I've got enough to survive, enough to practice." One way of developing contentment is

being generous. If you give things away, that develops a sense of wealth, even with just a few things.

This is one of the big lessons I learned in Thailand. Sometimes I'd be on my alms round, and someone would come running out a little tiny grass shack with something to put into my bowl. You looked the grass shack, and it was just big enough for two people to lie down in. They didn't have much, but they had enough to share. That comes from certain attitude, content in realizing what you've got is plenty enough. Especially nowadays, when people have more and more things, you begin to see that the more things you have, the more you're weighed down.

So if you learn how to develop a sense of contentment, you don't have to spend so much time working to amass money and then getting buried in the mass. You have more time for yourself, more time to develop the mind. And again, you get used to finding happiness in ways that don't depend on material things. You cultivate the mind instead.

The third topic is seclusion, finding some time to be by yourself, to get away from the values of other people, to see what your values are, what's important to you. It's only when you get the clamor of other people's voices out of your ears that you begin to see what's clamoring inside your mind. Then you can start sorting it out. After all, the mind has all kinds of attitudes it's picked up from outside, from other people, from your past experiences. You've got to sort out which ones you really believe in, which ones you don't, because otherwise these influences can work on you even when you're far away from other people.

So again, having the mind centered on the breath is a good place to be. If you spend all your time in your thoughts, it's like winds blowing you around. This wind blows south, that wind blows north, and you get pushed around like clouds in the sky. But if you've found a good solid place on here on Earth—in other words, you get some grounding in the body—then you can watch those thoughts as they go north, they go south, but you don't have to go north or south with them. You can stay right here to watch and see where you want to go. Do you want to go north? Do you want to go south? Or do you want to stay right here. You've got the choice. Again, if you put your mind in a place where it really does have choices and you realize what the choices are, you can see where they're going to lead, and you realize you have the power to make the choice, you're in a much better position. You're much more in control.

Then there's the principle of non-entanglement: Often we see relationships as being opportunities, but often they just tie you down, tie you down, tie you down, and you find yourself with less and less room to maneuver. So you have to learn to

deal with other people in ways where you can help them, but you don't have to get entangled. That's an important skill.

So when you find thoughts arising in the mind that will entangle you, you say, "I don't need that right now." This is an important value. It's an important principle. All too often, society would have us believe that being involved in other people, getting entangled with them, is somehow the meaning of life. But those entanglements can get very, very confining. They give you less and less room actually to do good. In the meantime, the mind gets confined, gets less and less self-reliant.

So when the really big issues of life come up, how are you going to deal with aging? How are you going to deal with illness? How are you going to deal with death? When these things suddenly come, the people you're entangled with can't share out, say, the pain of the illness so that you feel less pain, and they can't hold your hand. Even if they do physically hold your hand, they can't help you through the process of dying. Only if you develop the mental skills that deal with how the mind moves from one mental world to the next will you have the skills that you need.

So in your practice of the meditation, it's not just a matter of learning a technique. It's also learning a set of values.

The fifth value is persistence: persistently developing good qualities and abandoning unskillful qualities in the mind, at the same time teaching yourself how to enjoy this. Most of us like our unskillful qualities. We like our greed. We like our anger. We're comfortable in our delusion. Yet those are precisely the things that cause us suffering. When you realize this, you should develop an attitude where you're willing to let go of these things. You see through them. You see that they have some attractions, but they also have lots of drawbacks. You learn to balance the attractions against the drawbacks, and see which weighs heavier—because you have an alternative. You don't have to follow them. As long as you don't have that alternative, you can't see any way out.

This is why so many people think, "Gee, what would life be like without greed, anger, and delusion?" It sounds like porridge without any salt. So the Buddha doesn't say, totally abandon them right now. He says, learn some other skills—other ways of relating to the mind, relating to the whole issue of happiness—and then make the comparison. You find that the sense of ease and well-being that comes from getting the mind centered and still, seeing what's going on in the mind very clearly, provides a much more satisfying sense of well-being. It's not insipid at all.

So as you meditate, try to cultivate these attitudes in mind as well, so that you can resist the influences that come from outside. Being a meditator is like having your own personal culture. It's a little bit different from the culture outside, which sometimes may seem alienating and a little lonely, but when you look at the culture outside and see how screwed up its values are, you realize that this is your safe haven. It's not a bad thing to have your own separate culture, your own separate idea of what's really important in life, together with the skills that enable you to maintain that separate culture and find true happiness within it.

And you can imagine: People sitting around talking about modesty, what a good thing is to be modest, how happy you are to be content with what you've got, talking about seclusion, non-entanglement, putting an effort into developing the mind: It's not at all the way people normally talk in the society. Most people wouldn't be able to do it all, much less like it. But that's how you have to learn how to talk to your own mind. You realize that if you talk yourself in that way and you develop those attitudes, the mind develops an inner strength. You're encouraging yourself to be more self-reliant, to find a true happiness that doesn't depend on things outside, that doesn't believe in the message of society, which is basically just, "Buy, buy, buy. Don't be content with what you've got, be more assertive, get involved, get entangled. Don't worry about developing the mind. We will have all kinds of products that will keep you happy." That kind of message keeps the economy going, but it turns people into something less than people. They're just consumers, just salesmen.

Learning to be a meditator is what makes you a real human being, a complete human being, because as you meditate, you start developing a really strong sense of inner worth, inner independence, independent from things outside, someone with a really good strong foundation.

So work on this foundation, because you'll find that, as you stick with it, you can develop a happiness that goes a lot deeper and is a lot more gratifying than anything society could provide, or that you could even imagine.