

A Frame of Reference

December 31, 2008

Close your eyes and allow your awareness to settle on the breath. Take a couple of good long, deep in-and-out breaths. Notice: Where in the body do you feel the breathing process? Maybe in the rise and fall of the chest, the air coming in and out of the nose—any spot in the body where it's obvious that now the breath is coming in, now the breath is going out. Notice which spot your attention naturally gravitates to and allow it to stay right there. But as you're focused on that spot, don't tighten up around it. Don't put too much pressure on it, just enough pressure to allow you to stay with that one spot and not lose it.

As for any other issues that may come through the mind, you don't have to pay them any attention. If they can come in, they can go out. You don't have to sort them out. You don't have to investigate them. You don't have to pay them any mind at all. Just hang on to that sensation of the breathing. And allow the breath to find a rhythm that feels comfortable. You may want to experiment a bit to see: How short is too short, how long is too long? How heavy is too heavy, how light is too light? Where is the breath just right?—not too long, not too short, not too heavy, too light, too shallow, too deep. Take an interest in the breath.

Some people find it easy, once the breath is comfortable, just to stay right there. Others have to investigate it: What is this breathing process? How do you relate to it? Do you feel that you're somehow behind the breath, or are you *in* the breath? When the breath comes in, which sensations in the body are actually part of the breathing process on its own, and which sensations do you add?

If you find that those questions disturb the mind, get it stirred up, then just stay with the sensation of the breathing. But if you find that they help you get interested in the breathing, then they can be part of the meditation.

What we're trying to establish here is a frame of reference that you can stay with, that you're not going to leave. To stay, there has to be a sense of ease—and a sense of interest.

There are actually four qualities that can lead to concentration. One is desire: You simply want to do it, and that means that you're interested in it, you find that it captures your imagination. Another is energy: You put energy into it, persistence, you stick with it. That gives rise to concentration. Then there's intent, when you find that you can get really absorbed in the issue of how this breathing process feels in the body. Exactly how far does it go? That then shades over into the fourth quality, which is analyzing things.

You can bring any of these qualities to the breath, or any combination of them, to help you settle down. Desire is a good thing in the practice, as long as you learn how to use it properly. It's the same with all these qualities that we're working on. There has to be a proper balance. If all you can think about is the results you want to get, that's when desire gets out of hand and gets in the way. But if it's the desire to understand what's going on in the present moment, the desire to stay in the present moment, to stay with the breath, make it comfortable—in other words, desire focused on causes—that's a skillful use of desire.

Then there are three other qualities the Buddha recommends: mindfulness, alertness, and ardency. Mindfulness means keeping something in mind, as when you remember to stay with the breath no matter what. Alertness means noticing what's actually happening. What's the breath like right now? What's your mind doing right now? Is it slipping off? If you find it slipping off to other distractions, just pull it right back. You don't have to define what the distraction was, or note the distraction, just come back to the breath. Your main frame of reference is the breath, which includes all the energy sensations in the body. If you try to keep track of all your distractions, it's like chasing your shadow. You leave your frame of reference. You never really settle down.

What you want to do is to put the mind in a position where even though it may be aware of other things happening, they're all related to the breath. The breath is the place where you're taking your stance. In Pali, the word is *arammana*: It's your support. It's where you're standing. It's your foundation. You don't want to jump off that foundation to other foundations. Stay right here. Whatever happens, it's related to the breath, related to the breath.

If a thought comes in, what does the thought do to the breathing? What does the breathing do to the thought? A feeling comes in, maybe a feeling of pain: Well, how does that feeling of pain relate to the breath? Can you breathe through it? Or do you have to stay with the breath and just let the pain go? In other words, everything gets related to the breath as your primary frame of reference. You don't want to leave that frame.

The more consistently you can stay here, the more the mind can settle down and be at ease in the present moment, not always ready to jump. If you try to keep track of where it's jumping, it's like playing whack a mole: that game where you have all these little holes and every now and then a little mole sticks his head up out of a hole and you have to whack it with a plastic hammer. It's very distracting. You think you've got one mole, but then there's another one. Then there's another mole. You never get to settle down. So let the moles do what they want. You stay right here with the breath.

This relates to the third quality, which is ardency. You really want to do this skillfully. If you find that you've slipped off the breath, you come back right away. You don't delay. While you're with the breath, you want to be as sensitive as possible to how the breathing process feels so that you can make it more comfortable. The more sensitive you are to the breath, the more you stay with the breath all the way in, all the way out, trying to make it comfortable, all the way in, all the way out, then the better the meditation will go. If any part of the breath starts getting too long, just allow it then to turn around. If it's been coming in, allow it to go out. If it's been going out, allow it to come back in. If the breath is too short, you get a sense that the body isn't being properly nourished by the breaths, so allow them to get a bit longer.

Learn how to read the body's needs for breathing—because they'll change. Over the course of the hour, you may find them getting more refined. If, all of a sudden, you find that you've got it too refined, you can breathe more deeply. Stay on top of things. This is how you strengthen your alertness to what's actually going on.

Then the Buddha says that, as you're staying here, you put aside greed and distress with reference to the world. What that means is that if there are any thoughts of the world outside of the world of the breath, you just let them go. Any memories of what happened today, or plans for what's going to happen tomorrow: They're not part of your frame of reference right now. Your frame of reference is just the breath in and of itself. You're not watching the breath in terms of the world. You're not watching your body in terms of the world. Body in terms of the world means: Is the body strong enough, good looking enough, getting too old, getting too sick? That's body in reference to the world. Body in and of itself means just: What is it like to experience the body right here, right now? That's your frame of reference.

Learn to explore it. Learn to feel more and more at home here, with a sense of settling in, so that whatever disturbances come past, they go right through, without disturbing you. It's as if your body and mind are a big screen, like the screen on a window. The wind comes through, the sounds come through, but the screen stays right there. It doesn't get knocked off balance; it doesn't get destroyed. It doesn't even vibrate. The sounds don't poke any extra holes into the screen. There are already enough little holes for them to go through. So think of your awareness as not catching things. The image in the Canon is like a net that doesn't catch sounds, doesn't catch the wind.

When the breath gets comfortable, think of that sense of comfort spreading to fill the whole body, so that you breathe in with the whole body, you breathe out

with the whole body. If you find that that gets distracting, then just stay with your center. Think of whatever sense of comfort or ease there is in this, your focal center, and just let it spread. It can go in any direction. You're not going to place any restraints on it. Think of it being wide open. It can send its influence anywhere, any direction, while you stay right with it. This ensures that you don't tighten up around it, so that the mind doesn't feel restricted, the body doesn't feel restricted. You have a sense of openness, even though you're centered: staying right here with a sense of openness and ease around. That's the quality you're working toward, so that the mind can have a foundation.

Only when the mind has a foundation where it can stay still in the midst of all the other movements of the world can it really see things clearly. This is why mindfulness leading into concentration is the basis for insight.

So while you're practicing here, try to stay as steadily with the breath as you can. When you get a sense of ease that comes from allowing the breath to come in and out in whatever way it's going to feel comfortable for the body, let it spread without limit. If you find that working at it and experimenting doesn't help at all, just think, "Okay, let the body breathe in whatever way it wants." You just keep tabs on how it's going, to make sure it doesn't veer off into something uncomfortable.

When you gain this sense of ease, then try to carry it with you as you leave. As you get up, walk out of the building, try to maintain that sense of ease in your center, so that the physical movement of the body doesn't disturb it, the movements of the mind don't disturb it. Notice what movements *do* disturb it, and then just drop them. Come back to that sense of ease. This gives you a frame of reference, a focal point. Or you can watch the movements of the mind, and begin to see which movements create unnecessary stress, and which ones are actually part of a path leading to the end of stress.

But the basic skill, or the preliminary skill, the essential skill, lies in getting the mind to develop a sense of ease at its center—wherever you've chosen the center to be in the body—and learning how to maintain it. This takes time and practice. You're going to slip off the center, and you'll have to establish it again. It's going to happen many, many times before it gets consistent. As Ajaan Lee once said, it's like putting a bridge across a stream. You put posts on this bank and posts on the other bank: Those are not the difficult ones. But the posts in the middle of the river—especially if it's a large stream or large river: Those are the hard ones because the current is so strong. The mind's currents are stronger than the currents of any river, and they tend to move out in all directions. You've got to let

them just flow right through, without your going along with them, as you stay in your frame of reference.

That's when the mind can begin to have a sense of being at home, a sense of belonging right here, a sense of strength. When its actions come from a sense of strength, they tend to be less harmful. It's when we feel weak and threatened that we tend to do careless, thoughtless, even evil things. But when we feel strong right here in the present moment, we're much more likely to want to do the skillful thing. The harmless thing.

What this means is that this sense of center is a gift not only to yourself, but also the people around you. You're coming from a better place.

So do what you can for the rest of the hour to see how continually you can stay with a sense of ease, wherever you've chosen your central focal point. If you fall off, well, get back on again. See how long you can stay this time. Each time you notice you've fallen off, don't get discouraged. The fact that you catch yourself is a sign that you're strengthening your mindfulness—and that's a step in the right direction.