

Refuge

November 17, 2012

Try to focus your attention right here at the breath. Wherever there are sensations in the body that tell you, “Now the breath is coming in; now the breath is going out,” try to stay with those sensations.

Try to be as consistent as you can in staying here because it’s only when you stick with the breath consistently that you’re going to be able to make a change in the mind. Otherwise, the breath just becomes one more stopping off place as you follow your trap lines around. But if you stay here, you can create a really nice state of becoming.

Now, we all know that becoming is one of the causes of suffering. But if you learn how to do it well, it becomes the path to the end of suffering. Becoming is a sense of who you are in a world of experience. Right now, the world of experience is the breath in the body, and you are the observer. You’re the one trying to stay focused here.

As for other becomings that you might create right now about the past or about the future, just let them go. You don’t have to get involved. Many of our becomings are created by the mind running around. It’s like taking a picture while you’re running: It’s bound to be blurry. There are bound to be all sorts of problems with the picture. But if this state of becoming can develop around a still center, it has a chance of being more reliable—better assembled. As the Buddha said, it’s a home for the mind.

Not that you’re going to stay here forever, but it gives you a good, secure way-station on the path, a place where you can rest and settle in. It can give you refuge. This is one of *the* most basic concepts in the teaching, and it’s also one of the most important because the mind does need safety. It does need security.

When you look at life, so many of the things in which you try to find safety and security come and then they go. In fact, for most human beings, life is just one long series of disappointments. We think we can find safety and security in our parents, but it turns out that’s not the case. Find safety and security in our friends? That’s not the case, either. Even our own bodies are going to grow for a while and expand their range of abilities, and then those abilities are just going to go away.

So in the midst of all this change, we’ve got to find someplace where the mind can find some security. That’s why we practice. The ultimate security, of course, is

the deathless. That's where you find genuine refuge. But there's the relative refuge of the path where you can create this sense of being still, here in the present moment, and find well-being right here so that you don't have to base your well-being, your happiness on things outside, people outside—anything other than the breath. And because you're creating this sense of becoming right here where you're still, it's going to be more refined, better built, just like a picture that's taken when you're standing very still. The camera is on a tripod. It doesn't move at all, so the picture comes out sharp and detailed.

There are actually several kinds of becoming that you're creating here. You find that two of them are important as you meditate. One is the sense of you as the observer just watching what's happening. And then you as the doer, who adjusts the breath, watches it for a while again, sees what needs to be changed, evaluates how the results are going, and then tries to be ingenious to figure out new ways to make them go better. That's just one of the series of duties that the doer does.

The doer also works on fending off distractions. If you see that the mind is going in a particular place, you've got to pull it away. You just can't let it wander there until it's done with the distraction, because that wastes a lot of time—and you're also developing bad habits. As soon as you sense that the mind is wandering off, you bring it right back. When you bring it back, you've got to figure out how to make it stay.

One good way to make the mind stay is to reward it when it comes back—like training a puppy. You call it, and it doesn't come. You jerk the leash and it comes. Of course, it doesn't like having the leash pulled like that, but then you give it a little treat to make up for it. After a while, it'll come without your having to jerk the leash. In the same way with the breath and the mind, you keep rewarding the mind with a really gratifying breath each time it comes back. After a while, the mind will be happy to come back on its own.

Then when you're here, you try to figure out a way to make it like staying here. After all, one rewarding breath: If you can do that, you can do two, or three, or four. Then vary the breath as you see that the body's need vary. Make it longer, shorter, deeper, more shallow—whatever's needed right now. When there's a sense of ease that comes from the breathing, allow that sense of ease to spread through the body.

These are the different duties of the doer that you're creating as your internal identity as a meditator. So you've got the observer, watching what's going on, and the doer. The observer is needed to make sure that the doer doesn't do strange things or deny any undesirable results of its actions. At the same time, the doer looks after the observer to make sure that it's balanced.

So these different forms of becoming—even though eventually, some day, you'll have to abandon them—are necessary parts of the path. After all, the path is not the goal. That's something that has to be stated over and over again. Some people say, "I've got to let go. I've got to see that there's no self or whatever. And so I'm just not going to do anything. I have to have no preferences, so I'll just pretend like nothing is better than anything else." That's cloning what you've heard about awakening, but it's certainly not awakening. It's just a very passive state of mind. And it's in a lot of denial because acceptance doesn't just mean accepting what's happening right now. It also means accepting the fact that you have a role in shaping what's happening right now, and you can do it better. You can shape your experiences into a path.

So these aggregates of ours, which can lead to so much suffering when we cling to them, can actually turn into the factors of the path. You're focusing on the form of the body right now, especially the breath. There's a feeling of pleasure and the more neutral feelings that come as you stay with the breath. There are the perceptions that keep you with the breath through the way you picture the breath to yourself. You can work with those to see what way of picturing the breath leads to a feeling of breathing that feels really good inside.

There's fabrication, your internal conversation about the breath, your directed thoughts and your evaluations of what's going on; and then consciousness, which is aware of all these things. There you've got them all here, the five aggregates, and you turn them into the path. They become your home right now, a much more solid home than any other one you could fabricate from those aggregates. So right here is where you find refuge as you develop these skills

We talk about the Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Sangha as refuge. On the external level, they're a refuge in the sense that they give us good examples on how to act, because everything in the path is about our actions. We come to the meditation so that we can see our actions more clearly and engage in them in more skillful ways. The refuge that the Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Sangha offer is to show us: This is how it's done. They also give us encouragement that it can be done well, and the results and rewards that come are really worth it.

But the genuine refuge comes when you can put things together inside until they form a path, and the path takes you to the goal. That's when you see that what the Buddha said was right. There really is an unconditioned dimension where there is no aging, illness, or death. There's no separation. There's no stress or suffering at all. It's something available to all of us.

Some people say, "I don't want to go there until I can take so-and-so along with me." But the best way you can get other people there is to get there yourself

and then show them, through example, that it's possible. If everyone waits for everybody else to gain awakening, it's like there being a fire in a movie theater. Everyone gets to the exit, and someone says, "No, you first." The other one says, "No, you first." As a result, everybody burns to a crisp in the theater. Nobody gets out. If you've got the opportunity to practice, you go for it.

Think about all the great ajaans. They show us that it is possible to follow this path. It is possible to gain the results here and now, in this day and age. There was a belief in Thailand for a long time that the time for nibbana was past. Even the time for jhana was past. This is what all the brightest minds in Bangkok were saying. But then there were some peasants' sons up in the Northeast who said, "No. Why should there be any time when nibbana is open or not open? It's timeless. It should always be open." After all, all the elements of the path are here; everything you need is here. It's just a matter of your making the choice that this is what you want to do.

Virtue hasn't been close off. Concentration hasn't been closed off. Discernment hasn't been closed off. They're all here; they're all open. It's just a question of your giving them priority.

You decide if you really do want to find refuge. There's been enough of this aging, illness, death, and separation over and over and over again. Nobody forces you to practice, there's just the fact of suffering and the realization that it's not necessary. That's what gives the impetus to your practice. So the choice is yours.