

## *To Strengthen the Path*

*April 2, 2017*

Focus your desires on staying with the breath. All too often we hear that the Buddha bad-mouthed desire, calling it the cause of suffering. But not all desires cause suffering. Some desires are part of the path, like the desire to get the mind in a good state with a sense of well-being with the breath. Breathe in a way that feels good. And if it doesn't feel good, then have the desire to figure out how to make it feel good. You can try longer breathing, shorter breathing, faster, slower, heavier, lighter, deeper, more shallow. The desire to keep doing this counts as right effort.

Take some time to get to know the breath. Try to fully occupy your body right here. In other words, any thoughts that go outside of the body, just let them be. You don't have to continue them. As they say in Thai, you don't have to continue the weave. Lots will come up. That's normal. But you don't have to get involved with everything that comes up. Instead, you want to have a sense of being fully here in the body, from the head down to the feet, all around, with a sense of the breath energy flowing well, down the spine, down the legs, and out the soles of your feet. We're not talking air here. We're talking just about a sense of movement or energy.

Think of things flowing well. After all, the blood is flowing around the body. All these different fluids are flowing around. Impulses are flowing through the nerves. Try to be sensitive to that. We tend to block these things out because we think we have more important things to think about or to pay attention to. But right now, there's nothing else you have to think about; nothing else you have to do. Just be right here with the sensation of having a body that's breathing comfortably.

You're creating a whole world here around this desire. There's the sense of you inhabiting the body. And in Buddhist terminology, that's called becoming. As the Buddha said, the desires that lead to becoming can cause suffering, but at the same time, you have to create a sense of becoming to make a path.

The path requires developing a lot of things, and the act of developing is based on desire. There's the desire in right effort. There's the desire in right resolve. You want to create a happiness that doesn't harm anybody: doesn't harm you; doesn't harm the people around you—a happiness that leaves the mind clear, unlike the happiness, say, that comes from gaining sights, sounds, smells, tastes, tactile sensations that you really like or things that you can fantasize about. Those things can be pleasant, but they leave their imprint on the mind. They cloud the mind. What we want is a clear mind that's fully present right here.

Now this world that we're creating right here, inside the body, where we're inhabiting the body fully, is going to have to be fighting against other worlds that the mind tends to create.

The mind is creating little worlds all the time. Say you have a desire for pizza. All of a sudden, you are the person who's going to eat the pizza and you're the person who's going to get the pizza. And the parts of the world that are relevant in your personal world at that point are the parts that either help you get the pizza or get in the way. Other identities that are not related to getting and eating the pizza are just not relevant. They disappear in that world. And things in the world outside that are irrelevant to the pizza world get pushed to the background, too, even though they're out there. But then when the desire for pizza's gone, another desire will come in. And you'll have a new you with a new identity and a new world.

And the mind likes doing this. Give it some free time, and it can fantasize all kinds of worlds into being, which is a danger right now. It sees that you're just here with the breath and it looks like an empty space or time. You could fill it with all kinds of fantasies. So you've got to strengthen your resolve, strengthen your determination. You're not going to go with anyplace else but right here: the sense of you inhabiting the body.

You're going to need the five qualities that the Buddha says strengthen this becoming that you've got here that's part of the path. They're called the five *bala*, or strengths.

The first is conviction: conviction that the Buddha really knew what he was talking about. He really was awakened. He really did see that your actions are important. They shape your life. They don't totally shape things in the present moment out of nothing, because, after all, you have to live with the results of past actions. But you do have some choice in how you shape the raw material coming in from the past. So you hold onto these principles as a form of conviction. You don't have any proof yet, but these are good things to believe. They're an assumption, a working hypothesis you need in order to get the mind to settle down and feel that settling the mind down where it can watch closely over its actions is a good thing to do. It's possible and it's a good use of your time.

The other strength that's related to that is discernment. When you see that you're creating suffering for yourself anywhere, you want to look into it. We talk about seeing things in terms of the four noble truths, and it sounds kind of exotic and formal. But it's actually something very close to what we do a lot of the time with other things that we find are problems. We try to figure out what the problem is and then what's the cause. And is it possible to solve it? If so, what can you do to solve it? That's the structure of the four noble truths. It's simply that now we apply it to the suffering you're causing yourself right here, right now.

Both of these strengths, conviction and discernment, relate to the Buddha's insight on the second and third knowledge that he had on the night of his awakening. In that second knowledge, he saw that people die and are reborn into worlds high and low based on their actions. Their actions are based on their views. In other words, the worlds you experience come from your way of paying attention to things and the views you hold about things, and then the intentions and actions that are based on that. So the conviction and the discernment here are

the views, the way you pay attention to things, the things you see as important and, in contrast, the things that you see should be put in the background.

And then the intentions, the actions, relate to the other strengths: persistence, mindfulness, and concentration. These relate to what you've got to do, based on what you believe or are convinced of and on the principle of cause and effect that you discern. You see that the best thing to do is to shape a state of mind that's harmless, a state of mind that's skillful. Anything that comes up in the mind that's going to go against that, you want to put it aside. And you want to prevent it from coming up, if possible.

As for the qualities that will get the mind into concentration, you want to develop those. Once they're there, you want them to develop further. That's what persistence is all about. Mindfulness is keeping this in mind. It's not simply being aware of things without judging them. You actually are judging things, figuring out what's useful to stay with, and then remembering that, trying not to forget.

The Buddha talks about having four frames of reference. And they're relevant to what we're doing, as we're trying to get the mind into concentration, because what is a concentrated state of mind? It's your awareness filling the body with a feeling of well-being. Right there you've got mind, body, and feeling, the first three of the frames of reference. And then there are dhammas, which are various ways of seeing, if the mind and body and the feelings are out of balance, what you can do to bring them back into balance. What qualities need to be abandoned, like the hindrances? What qualities need to be developed, like the factors for awakening? What needs to be comprehended?

The fact that you're clinging to things that are causing you suffering: You want to comprehend that. So you get the mind into concentration. And then as the mind does settle down, you find yourself thinking about your object, which is the breath, at the same time evaluating how well it's going. This is a necessary stage in the concentration because you've got to get that sense of well-being that you can develop through the breath to permeate the whole body.

The Buddha's image is of a bathman. Back in those days, they didn't use bars of soap. They had a bath powder. You'd mix it with water and get kind of a dough that you would then rub over your body. And so the bathman would have to mix the dough in the same way that we mix dough for bread. You take the powder, you mix it with the water, and you knead the water through the dough until you get the soap dough that you want, so that the water doesn't drip out and none of the bath powder is not moistened. You want to have that same attitude toward letting the sense of the pleasure and ease spread through the body.

And wherever it seems to be recalcitrant or not cooperating, what can you do to get around it? One way is just to envision that even if it feels like there's a blockage in the body, it's porous. Think of all those atoms that go to make up the body. There's a huge amount of space in the atoms and between the atoms. Well, think of the breath energy flowing through those

spaces. Don't let the perception of a solid block get in the way. If there're places where there's tension in the body, allow the tension to relax. The relaxation of muscles in the body helps to get that sense of energy flow more constant, smoother, more pleasant.

And as you get this sense of well-being, this becoming that you're creating here grows a lot stronger and more stable. It's able to resist the temptation to go off thinking about something else, because it feels really good staying right here. The mind feels nourished. It feels clear. It can inhabit the whole body. There's no part of the body that's pushing it out.

If you find there are little islands in your sense of the body that don't cooperate quite yet, well, just work around them. Make the majority of the body as comfortable as you can. In this way, you create a sense of well-being, a becoming here that's strong, that enables you to stay on the path.

So even though eventually we have to go beyond becoming, we have to learn how to use becoming to do that. It's by learning to study this process of becoming as we work in concentration that we actually get deeper and deeper levels of discernment. As with so much else in life, you learn not by memorizing. You learn by doing. This is what we're doing right now. This is our karma right now: good karma, karma in the present moment. You want to make that power we have to shape things work to our advantage. If any thoughts come up that doubt the value of this, say, "No. The Buddha knew what he was talking about." Take that as your working hypothesis.

And, as he said, the key to understanding things is to understand how the mind creates suffering. Even though it wants happiness, it keeps creating suffering for itself. You want to look into that. Why is that happening? That's the problem you want to solve. And you do that by getting the mind into concentration. It's when the mind is in concentration that you can see these things a lot more clearly.

So you want to take this state of becoming and make it strong so that it can learn new habits and withstand its old habits with confidence that it's on the right path, a path that goes someplace. It goes to the realization of what it is in the mind that doesn't suffer, that's not weighed down by anything at all. That's the place this goes to. It's not really a place, but it's the goal. But to find this goal requires strength. All these five qualities—conviction, persistence, mindfulness, concentration, discernment: Without these strengths you never get there. With them, you can. And the choice to develop them is yours.