

Introduction to the Breath

February 19, 2005

Those two last chants we have are there to remind us why we need to meditate. We're looking for happiness. We're looking for a sense of well-being. But we live in a world where there's aging, illness, and death. The Thai translation of that statement we chanted—"subject to aging, subject to illness and subject to death"—can also mean, "aging is normal, illness is normal, death is normal." That's the way human life is. Separation is a common part of life. That's what we're up against.

The fifth reflection of those five is the only one, when taken on its own, is not depressing or discouraging. In fact, it's the opposite: Our happiness or lack of happiness depends on our own actions, and the word "actions" here means not only what we do with our body but also with our speech, and most especially with the mind. In other words, the mind can make a difference, that in spite of the situation outside, by training the mind it's possible to gain a happiness that isn't shaken when there's aging, illness, and death, when there's separation. It's in this way that we can find the happiness we want, through our own actions, through training our intentions, in such way that we strengthen the mind, so that its happiness doesn't need to depend on things that age, grow ill, and die, or that we can be separated from.

That's why we're here. Specifically, the training has to start with mindfulness and alertness. On the one hand, we keep our situation in mind, realizing that we can't be careless in our lives, because our actions do make a difference. They have effects that sometimes we may not like, so we have to be careful about what we do. But the fact that we need to be careful means that there are precious things in the mind. Keep those in mind as well: your desire for true happiness and the good qualities you have—goodwill, compassion, appreciation, and equanimity when it's needed, as well as things like mindfulness and alertness, because you need to be alert to what you're doing if you want to understand where you're causing yourself unnecessary suffering.

That's what we're working on as we meditate: mindfulness and alertness. Try to be mindful of the breath. Keep the breath in mind. When it's coming in, know it's coming in. When it goes out, know it's going out. Keep that task in mind. Remind yourself that that's what you're here for: You're here to develop these good qualities, and the breath gives you a good place to practice, because the breath is always with you. Then the alertness is what actually watches what the breath is

doing, and also watches what the mind is doing. Then, if you notice it slipping off the breath, bring the mind right back.

That's the third quality that's needed, the quality of ardency or intentness in what you're doing, giving it your full attention, because your happiness depends on your ability to train the mind, to develop these qualities. It's not only your own happiness that comes from this, but also the happiness of people around you. There are so many times when we know the right thing to do, the thing that would help the people around us, and yet we don't have the energy. The meditation gives you the energy, gives you the strength, so that the right thing to do becomes an easy thing to do. In this way, the people around you benefit as well.

Meditation is not a selfish endeavor. It's one of those few activities that is good both for you and for the people around you.

So keep that in mind as you meditate, too.

Now, if you notice the mind slipping off, then when you bring it back to the breath, try to make the breath more comfortable, because often the reason we slip away is because the breath doesn't feel right. It feels tight or constricted or forced. So be very careful to notice: Is the breath getting too long? Are you squeezing it out too much, or pulling it in too hard? Or in another direction: Is it so weak that you can't focus on it? Learn to adjust your breathing, adapt your breathing to what feels just right for right now.

It can take a little while to get a sense of "just right." But who can know better than you what's going to be just right for your body? You learn to use your own sensitivity, learn to read the sensations in the body, and you begin to notice that the sensation of breathing is telling you things: that it's too long or too short, too deep, too shallow, or that it's just right. This is something you can experiment with.

If you have trouble staying with the breath, you can use a meditation word. *Buddho* is a traditional one. It means "awake." That was the title of the Buddha; that was why he was titled the Buddha: because he was awake. He'd woken up from his delusions, from his ignorance. That's the quality of mind we're trying to develop here: to be awake to what we're doing.

When the breath starts getting comfortable, you can think of spreading the comfortable sensation throughout the body. In other words, find one spot in the body where it's easy to keep track of the sensation that tells you now the breath is coming in, now the breath is going out, and both the in and the out feel comfortable right there. Then just think of that sensation of comfort spreading through the body, seeping through the body, to give you energy where you're tired, to relax you where you're tense. You may find that some parts the body

don't seen open up to that sensation. Well, just go around them. Go through them. Focus on the areas where you can create a sensation of ease and well-being, so that simply sitting here breathing in and breathing out feels good. You're not tensing up the body in any place to create breath sensations or force the breath too much.

If you want, you can go through the body section by section. You might start at the abdomen and work up through the chest, the throat, the head, down the back, out the legs, and starting at the back of the neck, going down the shoulders and out the arms, until you've covered the whole body. Just notice what each section body feels like as you breathe in and as you breathe out. Where there's tension or tightness, allow it to relax, so that you're not creating tension as you breathe in, and you're not holding on to any tension as you breathe out.

This way, you create a sense of ease that permeates and suffuses the whole body. Then you learn how to allow it to stay so that you're not pushing it or pulling it too much, and you're not squeezing it out. When that general sense of well-being and ease is allowed to stay there, it grows into a strength.

This is what we are working on: the strength the mind needs, because it's going to put up with a lot of issues in life—both things coming in from outside, and issues that come bubbling up in the mind itself. You need the strength to figure out what's the right thing to do in response to whatever is happening around you or in you.

So this is what basic meditation is about. It gives you the strength you need to deal with the fact that aging is normal, illness is normal, death is normal, separation from others is an inevitable part of life. But we do have this ace in the hole: We have our ability to act, we have our ability to train our actions so that we don't keep causing suffering for ourselves. We all want happiness, yet one of the big paradoxes in life is that we interfere with our own ability to maintain a sense of well-being. We actively create suffering for ourselves, stress for ourselves when we don't need to. That's because we don't see it happening.

The meditation is what gives us the power to see, and the power—once we see what we're doing that's unskillful—to learn how to undo those actions, retrain ourselves. It gives us that power, too—that strength too.

This is our foundation. Work on this foundation consistently because if the foundation is weak, then the other things you want to build on top of it are going to come tumbling down. So make sure the foundation is strong. It's a simple exercise. The difficulty lies in sticking with it. But that difficulty gets weakened by the fact that if you understand what you're doing and why you're doing it, you see the value of a practice that really does make the mind much a stronger thing, a

much lighter thing to live with. Then understanding what you're doing, and seeing the results, gives you strength in and of itself.

So work on this foundation until you begin to see how it's affecting the mind. Then you can judge for yourself what a useful skill this is.