

Proving the Teachings

December 31, 2005

Get your body in position. Keep your back straight, facing forward, eyes closed, hands in your lap.

Then get the mind in position. Focus on the breath. Notice where you feel the in-breath, where you feel the out-breath. Focus on the process of breathing. It doesn't have to be the air coming in and out of the nose. Just whatever sensations are there in the body that let you know that now the breath is coming in, now the breath is going out: Focus on those sensations.

And let them be comfortable. Don't tighten them up. Think of the breath as a wide-open process. The whole body breathes in, and the whole body breathe out. It's an energy flow. And the energy can flow in any way it wants to, any way that feels comfortable. You don't have to force it in line with your preconceived notions of how the breath comes in, how the breath goes out. Just let it come in any old way it wants to, let it go out any old way it wants. You just stay right there with the sensations as you feel them in the present moment.

That's called putting the mind in position. It's not all that hard to *put* it in position. The hard part is getting it to *stay*. That requires mindfulness and alertness. Mindfulness means that you keep reminding yourself this is where you want to stay for the next hour, right here with the breath. Alertness is the process of actually watching the breath, watching the sensations and also keeping watch over the mind, catching it when it wanders off and then bringing it back.

In the beginning, keeping the mind in place basically means keep putting it back in place. It's going to wander off, it's going to slip off, it's going to slide off, it's going to forget itself. You find yourself thinking about New York City back in 1975 or whatever. The mind can create all kinds of little worlds for itself. What you've got to do is to wake up. It's like being in a little dream. Wake up and come back to the breath. And don't get discouraged. It's normal that the mind is going to wander. You simply have to be determined that you're going to train it, the same way you'd train a puppy to come. You have to use a combination of being strict with it but also being kind.

In other words, as soon as you detect that the mind is wandering off, bring it right back. Don't listen to any of its arguments about the things it's got to think about, or about how it's tired of the breath. If you're tired of the breath, well, go ahead and die. You've got to breathe. This is the process that keeps the body the

mind together. So it's good to explore this process to see exactly what's going on, so that you can get more out of it than just keeping the body alive.

When you pay really close attention to the breath, you find that you can breathe in all kinds of ways that really are beneficial for the body and beneficial for the mind. You can breathe in ways that feel full and refreshing. When you're tired, you can breathe in a way that gives you energy. When you're tense, you can breathe in a way that relaxes you. When you're upset, you can breathe in a way that calms you down. The breath has all kinds of uses—if you explore it, if you take the time to get to know it.

It's like getting to know a person. You can't just walk up and say hello and be trusted friends who know each other thoroughly. Friendship takes time. You have to take time *and* you also have to be observant. After a while, you get to know all the strengths and weaknesses about that person.

The same with the breath: If you spend time with the breath and are observant, you begin to notice that certain ways of breathing are associated with comfortable states of mind, good states of mind. Other ways of breathing are associated with bad states of mind. When you get all wound up in greed, lust, anger, delusion, or fear, sometimes that mental state leads to uncomfortable breathing. Sometimes it's the uncomfortable breathing that creates a bad mental state.

When you notice that, then you can start exerting more control over your mind simply by the way you breathe. This gives you a back door into getting some measure of control over your mind. This is the important issue in life: the way the mind is way out of control. This is the biggest force in our lives because it determines what we do, what we say, what we think. And these in turn have a huge impact on the way our life goes, the happiness and the suffering we experience, and the effect it has on the people all around us. It all comes out of the mind. And in just bringing the mind to be with the breath, you begin to see how little control you have over this force—especially at the beginning.

That should be disconcerting. Here it is, a force that could be used for a lot of happiness, yet when it's out of your control, how can you guarantee that it's going to work for your happiness or anything good at all? In fact, that fact explains why the Buddha taught the four noble truths. That chant we had just now: That was his first sermon, the first topic he brought up. He said, there is suffering in life—in the way we cling to the aggregates—and it comes from craving. We tend to blame our suffering on people outside, situations outside, but actually, whatever the situation is, the reason it makes the mind suffer is because of the way the mind

relates to it. Think of all the effort we put into trying to make ourselves happy, yet the mind has a way of undermining that happiness, sabotaging our efforts.

This is why we need to gain more control over it. When we have more control over the mind, it doesn't sabotage our efforts for happiness. You can actually train it and use it for the purpose of true happiness. That's the message of the four noble truths. You figure out the internal causes of the stress and suffering you're causing, and you can undo those causes, bring them to an end. When you bring them to an end, you find that the only real problem in life is just this: that the mind is creating suffering for itself totally unnecessarily. The sense of ease, the sense of release that comes when you learn how to stop that suffering is the ultimate happiness in life. And it's something you can do through your own efforts.

That's the message of the Buddha's first teaching. That was how he began his teaching career. And this is how you can begin to gain some control of your life: by looking at your experience in these terms. It's not an issue of who did what to whom, but simply the issue that no matter what happens in the world, the human mind when it's not trained, when it's not under control, can create suffering out of any situation. But you can train it, you can bring it under control—intelligent control. You don't become a control freak. You become a control sage. When you know how to control the mind skillfully, you can find happiness in any situation. It's just this issue of how craving and ignorance give rise to the suffering that really weighs us down. So start looking at your experience in those terms. The more you bring the mind to stillness, the more easily you can actually see things in these terms.

So focus on the breath. As we bring the mind in to the present moment, that's giving the mind a good place to stay from which you can see things very clearly. When you stay here, you begin to see the shape of your life in new ways. You can get out of the old narratives, that "This person did that to me, that person did this to me." It doesn't really matter who did what to whom. It's simply that there's a process that keeps getting repeated in the present moment, as you latch on to your experiences in a way that creates suffering, and yet it doesn't have to be that way.

If you're going to make a resolution for the new year, this is a good one to make: Just look at how your craving and ignorance are contributing to our own suffering. In what ways you can bring an end to that craving and ignorance? A lot of that ignorance is what we think of as knowledge. You know this, you know that, but it gets in the way of seeing how things create stress and suffering. Our problem is we tend to get very identified with a lot of our ideas: "These are my views, these are my opinions, this is my worldview." Yet when all of these "my

things” create suffering, why do you want to hold on to them? You have the choice. You can choose not to hold on.

Often we resist. We think, “If I don’t have these things I claim as mine, what will I have?” Well, the Buddha gives you other things to replace them. The issue of the four noble truths is just learning how to look at your experience in these terms: stress, its cause, the activities that allow you to put an end to stress, and actually seeing stress end. The qualities you need to see comprehend stress include mindfulness and alertness—what we’re practicing right now—along with a sense of ardency. You keep at it, really pay attention to what the mind is doing, really get a sense of how your actions lead to pleasure or pain, stress or ease.

We often don’t like to look at this. When we suffer, we don’t like to see the connection between what we’re doing and how we’re suffering. This is what keeps us in ignorance. But when you can see the connection and you can see that the action you chose to do that’s causing the suffering is something totally unnecessary: That’s when you have a chance to gain real knowledge, useful knowledge, the knowledge that can change the habits of your mind.

So tonight’s New Year’s, which is a night for resolving on new beginnings, and this is a useful new beginning to resolve on. You’re going to develop as much mindfulness and alertness as you can throughout the year. If you see yourself doing anything unskillful, stop. Anything that’s causing harm to yourself, anything that’s causing harm to other people, as soon as you detect that, stop.

As you focus on that issue, then you become more and more sensitive to the subtler forms of harm and stress you cause. You keep up the same process: Wherever you see it, whether it’s in your thoughts, in your words, or in your deeds, that you’re causing harm, causing any stress that’s unnecessary, just drop it. When you can do that, you’re mature. Life takes a huge turn for the better. And you begin to see how many problems in your life were caused by the fact that you weren’t paying attention to what you’re doing. You didn’t have control over your mind.

When you gain a measure of control, you begin to find that your life is a lot less of a burden. You can live with yourself. You don’t have to keep distracting yourself. The more easily you can stay with yourself in the present moment, the more you can begin to see what’s really going on right here. And the more you can see that, the more opportunities you find for doing things skillfully. You come to see that the possibilities for happiness are more than you could have imagined.

It seems like such a tiny thing, the movement of the mind in the present moment, yet the Buddha says that everything depends on that. His teaching wasn’t a teaching about who created the universe in the past, or where the

universe is going to end in the future. He says the really important things you have to focus on are the little things happening in the present moment right now: the way you make a decision, the way you make a choice, the way the mind forms an intention and then acts on it. Everything hinges on that. If those choices are made with ignorance and craving, you're going to suffer. If they're made with knowledge—in particular, the kind of knowledge that see things in terms of cause and effect, skillful cause, unskillful cause, good results, bad results, the basic framework of these four noble truths—and you then act in line with that kind of knowledge, it makes all the difference in the world. You suffer much less.

So the Buddha's teaching doesn't place emphasis on how things got started in the past, or how things are going to end in the future. The emphasis is right here, in what may in the beginning seem like an unpromising ground, but it's actually where everything gets decided. Everything that has an impact on your life get started right here.

If you learn to take responsibility, learn to really focus on what's going on right here, you can put an end to suffering and end to stress. That's a big promise. But it's been backed up by 2,500 years of practice. People who've taken the Buddha's teaching and put it into practice have found that it really gives results. So check it out. See if you can prove it for yourself by trying to follow it as truly as you can. That's the only way it can be proven to be true.