

## *The Path of Happiness*

*February 1, 2007*

About a year and a half after I'd ordained, my father came to visit in Thailand, and I suggested he might want to learn how to meditate. So one evening, we went up to the porch of my teacher's hut. He sat in a chair, and his first question for my teacher was, "I'm Christian. Is this going to be a problem meditating?"

My teacher's response was, "No, we're going to be focusing on the breath. The breath isn't Buddhist. It isn't Christian. It doesn't belong to any particular religion. It's a common property all over the world. When you focus on the breath, then you get to your own mind. Once you get to your own mind, we can talk about the mind without having to bring any particular religion into it. That way, we can talk and understand each other."

So focus on your breath. Notice when it's coming in; notice when it's going out. Notice how it feels as it comes in and goes out. Where do you sense the breath? And here, we're talking about the process of breathing: how the body moves. The rib cage expands as you breathe in, contracts as you breathe out. You may be noticing that sensation. Or you may be noticing the movement of the air through the nose, the shoulders rising or falling, the abdomen rising or falling. Wherever the sensation of breathing seems most prominent, focus on that sensation. And allow it to be relaxed. Don't tense up around it.

Breathe in a way that feels free and easy. You can experiment to see what rhythm of breathing feels best. Try long, deep breathing for a while to see if that feels good. If it does, maintain that rhythm. If not, you can change. Try long in and short out, or short in and long out, or short in and short out, deep or shallow, heavy or light, fast or slow—whatever rhythm or texture of breathing feels best right now. If you're feeling tired, you may want to breathe in a way that energizes you. If you're feeling tense, you may want to breathe in a way that's more relaxing.

If your mind wanders off, bring it back. As soon as you catch it wandering off, bring it back. If it goes off again, bring it back again. No matter how many times it goes off, you want to keep bringing it back. Don't get discouraged, because the fact that you're catching it is a good sign.

Otherwise, just put aside all your other concerns right now. You have no other responsibilities aside from being here in the present moment with the breath with a sense of ease. The present moment in life is where all the important things are happening. It may not seem like much, but the mind is making its decisions. And

the decisions of the mind—its choices, its intentions—have a huge impact on your experience of pleasure or pain.

So here's a chance to get to know those decisions as they're being made. The more attention you pay to them, the more fully present you are here, the more you have a voice in what's being decided. The breath is a good anchor for the present moment because you know that as long as you're with the breath you've got to be in the present moment. You can't focus on a past breath; you can't focus on your future breaths. Wherever there's a sensation of breathing, that's right here, right now.

And we're developing a lot of good qualities of mind: mindfulness, which is the ability to keep something in mind; and alertness, your ability to know what you're doing, to watch what you're doing, to be clear about what you're doing while you're doing it. If you combine these qualities with ardency, you're really giving yourself to the practice. Your mindfulness and alertness grow more solid and strong.

The practice is good for the body, too. If your breathing feels good, it's good for your circulation. It helps to eat through any stress you may be building up in your system. People who suffer from stress diseases find that breath meditation is really good for taking a lot of the pressure off.

So think of this as an opportunity to heal the body and heal the mind, to gain strength in body and strength in your mind.

The pleasure that can arise from being at ease with the breath steadily is a very special kind of pleasure. It harms no one. It's actually good not only for yourself, but also for the people around you. If you have an inner sense of well-being, you tend to say things and do things that are less harmful for the people around you. So this is a practice that's good all around.

As Ajaan Fuang, my teacher, said, "The practice brings you to the mind." You begin to see the mind in action. What does the mind want? Basically, it wants happiness; it wants a happiness it can depend on. In fact, just about everything we do is for the sake of happiness—one kind of happiness or another. Yet the problem that's one of the big paradoxes of life is that many times the things we do end up *causing* stress and suffering. This is why we want to be here in the present moment more carefully, so that we can see the decisions that are being made, to get a sense of which decisions lead to stress and suffering, which ones don't.

This leads us to the big question: Is there a way that we can find happiness that doesn't interfere with the happiness of other people, that's actually conducive to their happiness? And is there a way we can find a happiness that's really true? This was the question that led the Buddha to leave home.

In the story of the Buddha's life, he made two decisions that were really quite remarkable. He started life out as a prince in a royal family, with lots of power, lots of wealth, and all kinds of sensual pleasures. After a while, he began to have a sense that it wasn't good enough. The pleasures he was enjoying so much, he began to realize, were going to change. They depended on his being healthy, young, and alive, and he knew he wasn't going to be healthy, young, and alive forever. What happiness would there be then? Was it possible to find a happiness that wasn't dependent on being healthy, young, and alive? As he contemplated this, he realized that, staying in the palace, he wouldn't be able to find that happiness. He had too many responsibilities, too many distractions, and so he made up his mind to leave.

He was willing to give up the happiness he knew for a happiness that was pretty uncertain. There was no guarantee that he was going to find anything more solid, more sure. But he told himself that if he didn't *try* at least, then he wouldn't respect himself. He would have felt that his life was wasted. So he made the sacrifice, went out into the wilderness, studied with the various teachers available at the time, decided that the paths they were teaching didn't lead to a true happiness—at least, a happiness that was beyond the touch of aging, illness, and death. So he went off to practice on his own.

This was where he decided to follow the path that led in the total opposite direction. He was going to inflict all kinds of hardships on himself. He tried to put himself into a trance through not breathing. All kinds of pains wracked his body, and he trained himself not to get discouraged by the pains. He went on very little food, maybe a handful of beans once a week or so, until he was so thin and emaciated that he would fall over every time he tried to defecate or urinate. But still, he didn't let the hardship or the pain overcome his mind.

He carried that on for five or six years, and this is the other remarkable part of his story—when he finally realized that this was going nowhere. You can imagine the amount of pride he'd built up over the fact that other people may have tried austerities, but nobody had ever been as extreme in doing them as he had. And his ability not to get dissuaded by the pain: There must have been a huge amount of pride there as well. There were five other monks who had joined him. I don't know if they were practicing austerities, too, but they were waiting for him to finally break through to an awakening so that he could tell them, and then they could know for sure if this was possible. But still, he realized that this was going nowhere, and so he reflected: Could there be another path?

He reflected back on his childhood. There was one point when he was sitting under a tree, and his mind came to a state of ease simply by being focused on the

breath—a sense of ease, a sense of rapture—and it came through a strong sense of concentration. The question arose: Could this be the path? And he had an instinctive sense that it was. But he realized that if he continued starving himself like that, he wouldn't be able to get back to that state of concentration, because it required a certain level of strength and health in the body.

So he gave up his austerities and started eating some food. His following was disgusted with him, yet he didn't let his pride get in the way. If they were going to get disgusted, that was their problem. He abandoned the pride that he had developed around his austerities. This was the other remarkable moment in his life. He ate food until he gained enough strength to bring his mind to that state of concentration. That became ultimately one of the factors in the path that he taught.

As he pursued that path, he asked himself, "Why am I afraid of this pleasure?" He said, "There's no reason to be afraid of it. It doesn't harm anyone; there's no blame in it." But notice, he took the pleasure as part of a path; it wasn't an end in and of itself. And it was a particular kind of pleasure, a particular kind of ease. It was based simply on having the mind focused on one object. It didn't depend on sensual pleasures or sensual desires. It was a different kind of happiness, a different kind of pleasure that came up from within.

There was a strong physical sense to it. As he said, once the mind enters into that kind of concentration, there's a feeling of ease and rapture that you can allow to fill the body. There's an ease that comes from breathing easily, and then you can think about that ease just spreading out through the body down the nerves, out to the pores. So the pleasure can be intense, but the important thing is that it's only part of the path.

You use that sense of pleasure to put the mind in a position where it can start analyzing what it's doing deep down inside that's still causing stress, because there still is a certain amount of stress in that concentration, even though it's very subtle. It's in seeing those subtle forms of stress that you begin to see the movements of the mind in a very direct way. That was how he began to see which forms of desire are actually part of the path and are conducive to concentration, and which forms of desire pull you away.

This is taking a very special attitude toward happiness. As the Buddha said, there are two extremes: total pursuit of sensual pleasures and then total rejection of sensual pleasures in extremes of self-torment. He said both of those lead to pain, ultimately; they don't lead to happiness. The true path includes developing a sense of ease from training the mind that puts us in a position where it's very clear. He says that when you develop the ultimate in right concentration, the mind is

very clear. Its mindfulness is pure; its equanimity is pure; and it can see very clearly what's going on—see what's skillful, see what's not.

So the sense of pleasure is an important part of the path. As long as you see it as a means to a further end, there's nothing to be afraid of. Sometimes you see in modern teachings, vipassana especially, the idea that there's a danger in right concentration. But the Buddha never said that. It's always presented as a necessary part of the path. Sometimes it's easy to get complacent because after a while you find that when you can master this kind of concentration, you can tap into it whenever you want. But you're fine as long as you know in the back of your mind that there's more work to be done, that this pleasure is to be used or pursued not as an end in and of itself, but as a means to a higher end: the ability to see more and more clearly into the mind. The more still the mind is, the more it's used to the sense of pleasure, then the subtler stresses it can see within itself.

This is how we walk that balance between the pleasure of the path and the sense of urgency—because there are passages where the Buddha says you have to practice as if your head were on fire. You do anything you can right away to put out the fire. We still have the suffering or the stress, the dis-ease that comes from aging, illness, and death, even on very subtle levels of the mind. But there's no way you're going to see the subtle levels until you learn how to drop your habits that create blatant stress. And there's no way you're going to be able to maintain the practice unless there's a sense of ease and well-being that carries you through. Ajaan Fuang called it the lubricant that keeps the engine of your practice from seizing up.

So learn how to cultivate this sense of well-being. It harms no one. It's good for you in body and mind. When you have a sense of inner well-being, you tend to act in ways that place less of a burden on other people as well. And you put the mind in a position where it really can see clearly what's going on. The more clearly you can see, the more likely you are to see how exactly the mind is creating unnecessary stress and suffering, and the easier it is to drop whatever the activity is.

This is why, in one of his discourses, the Buddha said that this is the heart of the path. All the other elements of the path are its requisites or its aids. But the ability to bring the mind to a sense of well-being, keeping it focused on one object like the breath, lies at the center of the path. Everything else revolves around this.