

## *Bad Friends Inside*

*April 14, 2007*

Close your eyes. Focus on your breath. Notice where you feel the breath in the body. It might be the air flowing in and out through the nose, the rise and fall of the chest, the rise and fall of the abdomen.

Focus your attention wherever it seems easiest to keep track of the fact that now the breath is coming in, now the breath is going out.

As for anything else that might be distracting, just let it go. Try to keep your attention focused right here in the present moment. Because all the important things in life are happening in the present moment.

And in particular your intentions. The things you intend to say, intend to do, intend to think about: These are the things that shape your life. And all too often we're not paying that much attention to them.

It's like working with power tools. When you're distracted, you can do a lot of damage. So you want to be very carefully attentive to what's actually happening right here, right now—what you're *doing* right here, right now. And the breath is a good way to anchor yourself in the present moment. You can't watch a future breath; you can't watch a past breath. You *can* watch, though, the breath in the present moment. So this is your anchor to keep you here.

Experiment to see what kind of breathing feels good right now. It might be deep breathing or shallow breathing, fast or slow, heavy or light. Get a sense of what feels best for the body right now. Because if you're going to stay here, you have to stay here with a sense of comfort, a sense of ease. If things are uncomfortable inside, the mind's going to go wandering off someplace else.

So take the breath as your friend.

We all want happiness, and yet you look at the things we do in our lives: A lot of the things we do create unhappiness, create suffering and pain. This is one of the big paradoxes in life. And, as I said, it's because we're not paying much attention to what we're doing.

If you think of the mind as a committee, there are lots of different voices in there, lots of different persons almost. And a lot of our problem is we don't know who to choose as our friends inside.

Sometimes we take greed as our friend, sometimes lust, sometimes anger, sometimes fear. We think these things can be relied upon, these things can be depended upon. We enjoy them. But they're like the type of friend who invites us to go down and throw some rocks at somebody's window. We throw the rock and

what happens? We're the one who gets caught, while they run away.

But the breath is always here. It's what keeps you alive, keeps you going. So try to be on good terms with it. And learn how to use it.

You'll notice that when there's greed, anger, or delusion, your breath changes. It's not comfortable. It feels tense or tight in different parts of the body.

This is one way to work around these different emotions. Every emotion has lots of components, and you want to learn how to take it apart. There's the mental side and there's the physical side. And sometimes it's easiest to work on the physical side first.

So if you notice a sense of tension or tightness or a catch in the breath, breathe through it. Think of it smoothing out. Then think of that sense of ease filling the body, so that your whole nervous system is breathing in, your whole nervous system is breathing out—all the way out to the tips of the nerves, out to all the pores of the skin.

Then ask yourself, "Isn't this a much better friend than your greed, your anger, your delusion, your lust or your fear?"

Once you've put the mind in a position of strength like this, you can take a good look at the thing that had you worked up and whatever direction it was taking you. You look at it for what it is. And then you look at the mind, the state of the mind that likes to get involved with greed, anger, or delusion.

Because often it's not so much the object, say, of our greed that we're really fixated on, it's the greed itself. We enjoy it, we enjoy wanting.

The same with lust: We enjoy not so much the object as the enjoyment of the feeling of lust.

The same with anger: Some people say that anger allows them to feel that they're alive. The blood gets racing. Their thoughts get spinning. And they enjoy the feeling.

What do they enjoy? Actually, they enjoy the release that comes after the tension. But that's like going out into the desert so that you can come back and really enjoy a glass of water. You put yourself through a lot of grief before there's a little bit of a payoff.

So by bringing the mind to the breath and getting a sense of ease with the breath coming in, going out, you can start looking at these emotions with a lot more clarity—because you're coming from a better position. You're not coming from a position of hunger. You're coming from a feeling of fullness in the body, fullness in the mind.

Then you can ask yourself, "Do you want to make yourself hungry just so that you can enjoy having that hunger assuaged? Isn't it better just to stay with the

fullness?”

As the Buddha once said, when you want to let go of something, it's not enough just to see the drawbacks of whatever it is. You also want to see: What's the allure, what had you hooked on that thing?

But look at it from this sort of position: the mind at ease, breathing in with ease, breathing out with ease, with a sense of fullness in the body. This way, it's a lot easier to see both the drawbacks and the allure for what they are. You can begin to see that the allure sometimes is pretty paltry. It's not worth the price.

This is the essential insight in any kind of letting go. Because the things we're attached to are not so much *things*, they're activities. And we engage in the activities because of the payoff. We go through a lot of trouble to get the reward. But if we see that the reward isn't worth the trouble, we drop it—not because anybody tells us to drop it, but because we simply see for ourselves it's not worth it.

So whatever your attachment: Realize that it's not so much to objects, it's to your enjoyment of the desire, your enjoyment of the anger. Try to recognize where that enjoyment is.

Then look at it from this position right here: feeling calm, nourished in the present moment by the breath. When you're well-nourished, then the question of wanting to hunger after things seems really strange.

The mind feeds in the same way that the body feeds. But the question is: What are you feeding it? Just as the body has junk food and health food, the mind has junk food and health food as well. Feeding on greed, anger, and delusion, lust and fear: That's junk food for the mind.

If all you knew was junk food, then you'd go for it. But if you begin to realize there's health food for the mind and you feed it on a good diet of health food, after a while you come back to the junk food and you realize, “This is junk: just fat and salt and sugar and carbohydrates. It's going to clog up your arteries for just a little bit of flavor. Is it worth the price when you've got something so much better here?”

In the beginning, we let go out of a sense of restraint. We've seen the dangers that come from our unskillful thinking, our unskillful emotions. And it's good that we learn restraint, but restraint isn't enough. We have to develop insight as well, to see why we're hooked in the first place.

When the mind is in a state of calm, centered, mindful awareness, you can see the hook, you can see the drawbacks, and then it's a different kind of letting go—not because anybody else told you to let go, but because you see right here in the present moment that it's not worth it. And it's in letting go that the mind is free.

The image in the Canon is of a fire. Back in the time of the Buddha, they had a sense that there was a fire element in everything, and if the fire element latched on to the fuel, started feeding on the fuel, then it would burst into flame. And as long as it was latched on to the fuel, it was trapped in the fuel.

Notice, the fuel doesn't trap the fire. It was the fire feeding on the fuel that trapped the fire. When the fire let go, it was released.

That's the image they had in the mind. It's what the word nibbana comes from: It's the letting go of the fire that frees it and puts it out.

In the same way, the mind is not trapped by its objects, it's not trapped by greed, anger, and delusion. It's trapped by the fact that it's chosen to hold on to these things. They're not attached to us. We're the ones attached to them. And because we're attached, we're the ones who are imprisoned. We're the ones who are limited by our attachment. It's when you let go that you're freed, free from any kind of limitation.

This is one of the reasons why there's so much emphasis in the meditation on being alert to what you're doing.

When the Buddha teaches mindfulness and alertness, it's not a general awareness of things in the present moment. It's very specific: Be mindful about what you do. Keep in mind that what you're doing is going to have results. And then be alert to watch what you're actually doing to see what the results actually are. You want to catch yourself in the act of creating suffering. Once you see that, and realize it's unnecessary, you let go. When you let go, you're free.

So do what you can to put your mind in a position of solidity in the present moment—with a sense of calm, a sense of ease and fullness with the breath.

That way, you can start to look at your old attachments and see them for what they are: limitations—things that you chose to do and yet they bind you. And you can ask yourself, "Do you want to continue choosing these things?" Because the choice is yours. We all have the ability to say Yes or No.

When you learn how to do this, then you find you can trust yourself much more. One of the scariest things in life is when you see that you can't trust yourself. But here's a training that shows you how you can.

When you can trust yourself, you're in a much better position. The question of trusting other people becomes less and less important because you've found something really reliable inside.