

Refuge

March 30, 2009

Breathe in a way that the mind can settle down with. In the very beginning, this may mean taking good long, deep in-and-out breaths, to clear out all your energy channels and to make sure that the breath is perfectly obvious here in the present moment. As you settle in, allow the breath to get more subtle. You've got to create a good safe place here, a strong place, a solid place for the mind to stay, because otherwise it goes wandering off into areas where it can get itself into trouble. It starts thinking about the past, thinking about the future, and there's trouble in both directions.

One way to keep you from wandering off that way is the chant we had just now. Thinking of all living beings helps give you perspective. For the most part, we're here because of the fact that there's suffering in our lives: blatant, out and out suffering, or just the constant wearying of stress. And we all realize something has to be done about it. Suffering is a very private thing. The pains you have, nobody else can feel. We can sympathize with one another. We can think in our minds what might be like for someone else to be in pain, but for each of us, it's our own private pain. There's that passage where Ven. Rattapala, the monk, quizzed the king: Even though he's king and has all kinds of power, but when he's ill, can he order his courtiers to share out his pains so he doesn't have to bear so much? Of course he can't. A lot of the sting of the pain is the fact that it is so private, and it's yours. So it helps to take some of that sting away by reminding yourself that everybody has pain, everybody has suffering. It's universal.

Think of the Buddha on the night of his awakening. In his first knowledge, he began to remember not only events in this lifetime, but events in previous lifetimes, going way back many eons: lots of narratives, and the narratives were all about suffering. There was death over and over and over again with each lifetime. And the question for him of course was: Was he the only one who had those many lives?

Then he directed his mind to how other people die and are born, and found out they, too, go through same pattern, over and over and over again. The whole cosmos—everybody is going through this. It was seeing the whole cosmos that enabled him to see that there was a pattern to this, all dependent on people's actions, the intentional acts they did under the influence of their views. If they didn't view that their actions were important, they tended to act in careless and thoughtless and harmful ways. So not only did they cause suffering for other

people but they caused suffering for themselves. But people who acted on skillful intentions with right view, understanding that action was important, that you had to be careful about what you did: Their actions were harmless, and they themselves suffered less harm, less suffering.

In one way, you might think that seeing this larger picture could have been even more burdensome. It wasn't just his suffering. It was everybody's suffering going on. But actually it enabled him to focus on the present moment with a lot more understanding, realizing that it wasn't just his suffering. Everybody has a narrative where there's a lot of suffering. That enabled him to look in the present moment with a lot more objectivity, a lot more understanding.

So it's good to think about all living beings, the fact that everybody is suffering, and you want everybody to be happy. You bring that attitude to the present moment because it gives you the perspective not only on the whole issue of suffering, but also on the whole issue of how your meditation is going. If you have difficulties staying with the breath, don't take it personally. Remember that everybody has trouble settling down, because everybody's mind's been wandering around for who knows how long. So you learn to take it in stride. You don't get discouraged, but at the same time you realize there's work to be done. If you've been wandering for eons and eons, it takes determination not to keep wandering on. At the very least, you want to find a good place to rest, a safe place, a solid place, which is what the breath is here to provide you with—if you take advantage of it.

This is why we practice concentration, to give the mind a good place to take a stance where it feels secure. You see some people saying that it's unnecessary to get into a good strong concentration, that you can just start developing insight, but the insight is going to be very unstable if it doesn't have a good solid foundation. This is what the concentration provides.

So allow yourself to bathe in the breath. Allow the breath to be really comfortable coming in, going out. Get sensitive to what feels really good right now, because that sense of feeling good is what's going to help you stay. Take some interest in this breath energy that's keeping you alive. When you're breathing, what's happening? Where do you sense the breathing? Breathing is actually a whole-body process, but you tend to be aware of it more clearly in some parts of the body than in others. Focus on those parts, so that the breath feels refreshing, feels energizing coming in, relaxing going out. And again, think of it bathing you all around. It's not just in one spot. It's all over the body. So when you notice where there's any tension or tightness in the way you sit, the way you hold

the body, allow yourself to sit straight up with as little tension as possible, relaxing into a good posture, and you'll find it's easier to stay here for long periods of time.

Because that's the whole point: Staying for long periods of time gives the mind a chance to rest and recuperate. You might think of it as a medicine for the mind. With some medicines, all you have to do is take one little sip, and the medicine does all the rest of the work. Or a little shot in the arm and the medicine does all the work. Well, it does its work, but it takes time. Even though there may be one shot, the medicine has to seep through the blood and it has to have its effect on the body. You can think of it like a cream that you apply on the skin. If there's a rash on your skin, the cream has to stay there. You don't want to just put it on and wipe it off. You put it on, you leave it there. The cream works into your skin to soothe the itch, soothe the rash. But it takes time.

In the same way, for the mind to settle down till it begins to heal from the wounds it's been suffering from, it's going to take time. So be patient with it but persistent. If it wanders off, bring it back, then reward it for coming back. Ask yourself what kind of breath would feel really, really good right now, and give it that kind of breathing. This way, you not only create a sense of well-being, but you're also developing good qualities in the mind. These are the strengths that you need.

One of chants we had just now was about taking refuge in the Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Sangha. You take refuge in them in the sense that you take them as examples. See how the Buddha found happiness. He challenges you and says that true happiness is possible, and that you can attain it through your own efforts. So you take up that challenge and you try his instructions to see if they work. Try to develop the same qualities he developed: mindfulness, alertness, persistence, concentration. As you stay with the breath, you develop these qualities, and they become your refuge inside.

So if you notice the mind wandering off, bring it right back. Your mindfulness and alertness help you with that. As for the experience of concentration, remind yourself that coming back really is a good thing. It puts the mind in a good place. You're trying to develop the wisdom that the Buddha developed, to see where there's suffering and what kind of suffering is totally unnecessary.

The fact of being born and living in this world, where other people who, like us, are born, grow ill, and die, can leave the mind ragged. So it needs to be healed. A lot of healing has to come from within because the way we react to those events is what causes all the unnecessary suffering in the mind. We're working on developing the skills we need so that we can live in this world and not suffer from it.

That's what the discernment does. It helps you ferret out where the cause of suffering is in the mind, and realize that the mind doesn't have to operate in that way. You can abandon the cause. In other words, you stop acting in certain ways that cause suffering, and then even though there may be the stress and the pain of aging, illness, and death, it doesn't make inroads on the mind. The mind has a sense of being separated from these things. In the Canon, they talk about discernment as a knife cutting through all the connections by which suffering comes in.

In this way, you really do have refuge. You're taking the Buddha as an example but developing your own mind so that it can be its own refuge. That's when your refuge is secure: when you've developed these qualities through which the mind can protect itself.

So we're working on a safe spot right here, or a safe place inside. And in the course of developing the safe place, you develop the strengths of mind that enable you to go beyond stress and suffering all together.

It starts right here: breath coming in, breath going out, as the mind stays with the breath all the way in, all the way out. Once you've established this toehold right here, its influence is going to spread, so that it becomes more than just a toehold. It becomes a total, solid foundation so that the mind as a whole becomes your true refuge.