

A Position of Strength

April 18, 2009

One of the good things about the breath as a topic of meditation is that it's always right here, wherever "here" is. Whether your "here" is at the monastery or at home or traveling from the monastery to home, or wherever you go, the breath is always right here. So it's here as a friend if you learn how to make it your friend. If you have an antagonistic relationship to the breath, then you have an enemy wherever you go, so you don't want that. Learn to be on good terms with the breath. Listen to it for a while to see what it has to tell you. Is it comfortable or is it not? If it's not comfortable, give it a little space. Just pose that question in the mind: What kind of breathing would be comfortable right now? See how the body responds. Or you can experiment a little bit. Just tell yourself, "How about some long breathing?" See how it feels. "Short breathing." See how that feels. Fast, slow, heavy, light, deep or shallow, see how the body responds.

When you find a texture and the rhythm of breathing that's agreeable to both sides, settle down with it. Learn how to make use of it. The Buddha talks about the different properties of the body—earth, water, wind, and fire—and then the properties of space and consciousness. The way he uses the word property, or *dhatu* in Pali, is that it has potential. You have the potential for breath feelings all over the body, solid feelings, liquid feelings, warm feelings, all over the body. And you can make them comfortable or make them uncomfortable.

So when you look at the present moment, what you've got is a lot of raw materials. Sometimes they're in good shape and sometimes they are not. If they're not in good shape, do what you can to make up for the lack. If they are in good shape, try to maintain them that way. This way, you give yourself strength. Again, it's the strength of having friends.

In Thailand, one of the old ways of teaching the strength of harmony or of concord in a group would be to show a little kid a stick, and say, "Can you snap the stick in two?" The kid says, "Yes," and then he does it. Then you give him two sticks, put them together. "Can you snap the sticks together at the same time?" Well, you can still do that, but it gets a little bit harder. Three, four, five. You finally reach a point where no matter how hard you try to snap the sticks, when you've got lots of sticks together, they won't snap.

It's a principle that works with a group of people outside, and also works with all these potentials you've got inside. Learn how to make them harmonious with

one another. Learn how to make use of them so that you can depend on them. They'll give you a good solid center no matter what's happening around you.

So take the time this evening to get familiar with your breath. Where in the body does it feel best to focus? It might be right between the eyes, in the forehead, at the palate—"breath" here meaning not just the air coming in and out of the lungs, but the whole energy flow in the body. It could be in the middle of the chest or right over the navel—any spot in the body where the mind finds it easiest to stay snug with the sensations there, and there's a certain steadiness to those sensations. From the steadiness of the breath sensations, you can allow the mind to get steady as well.

This is where the Buddha's teachings to Rahula on the four elements come in. He says try to make your mind like water, like wind, like earth, like fire. These things don't get upset by, say, whether the fire is burning pleasant things or unpleasant things, whether the wind is blowing pleasant things or unpleasant things, or whether the water is washing away pleasant things or unpleasant things, or pleasant or unpleasant things get thrown on the earth. Earth doesn't react.

So as you stay with these elements, try to pick up a little of that steadiness, that sense of solidity. When you're coming from a solid center, you're feeling less threatened, more secure. And when you're feeling unthreatened and secure, it's easy to be kind. You see this in nation states: When they're feeling threatened, they can do all kinds of evil things. When they're not feeling threatened, they look back on their evil behavior and say, "Oh, my gosh, how could we have done that?"

People can be the same way. *You* can be the same way. So you want to make sure that you don't put yourself in a position where you feel threatened. That means you've got to find a good center inside. Make use of these properties in the body, properties in the mind, so that no matter what happens outside, you don't feel threatened by it. You realize that your center of security is in here, first with the breath and then, as you develop it, it becomes more centered in the mind itself. That's when you can learn how to trust yourself.

So take advantage of the different potentials you have here right now. When the Buddha taught mindfulness, say, of feelings or mindfulness of mind states, he didn't stop simply with recognizing that a particular feeling or mind state is present. The next question that comes up is: "What do you do with it? If you stick with this mind state, where is it going to take you? Is it going to be skillful or unskillful?"

The Buddha, as we know, had a very strong sense of time and place, but there were some areas where he said his teachings were categorical. In other words, they stayed the same across the board no matter what the outside circumstances were.

He says you want to make sure that you never do anything unskillful and can never kill, steal, have illicit sex, never lie, speak divisively, speak for the purpose of hurting people's feelings, let your conversation wander off in all kinds of idle chatter; to give in to greed, ill will, or develop wrong views. All these things, he said, are categorically unskillful. You want to avoid them no matter what. Which means that you have to learn how to make the mind categorical as well. When it's categorically still, solid, you put it in a position where you can trust it not to do these unskillful things.

So there is a skill we have to work on, so that no matter where we go, we have the sense of security, we have a sense of belonging, being at home right where we are. Ultimately, we're going to start taking apart this sense of home, but before you do that, learn how to really develop it and make good use of it. As your awareness is centered right here, you're a lot better position to see what's going on in the mind, to see what unskillful potentials are coming up, and learn how to undercut them before they get strong. You can also use whatever skillful intentions you see here as your allies. You want to make the present moment a position of strength, so that whatever you choose to do or say or think comes from a position of strength and not a position of weakness.

The strength there is the strength of skillful qualities in the mind: conviction in the importance of maintaining a skillful state of mind, persistence in keeping it going, mindfulness, concentration, discernment. When these things are strong, when they're in charge of your mind, then you can trust it. It becomes your refuge. You realize that your happiness doesn't have to depend on things outside. It can depend on these qualities inside, and nothing outside can touch them, unless you let it come in. Which is why it's important to have right view about this, that this is what's really important to maintain, this is what's really important to develop and bring to the culmination of its development. This is where you want to invest your time and energy. Give this your top priority, and everything else will fall in line.