

## *Befriending the Breath*

*May 7, 2009*

We have a whole hour here to make friends with the breath, which requires two things: one, that you be observant; and two, that you spend a lot of time with it. Otherwise, you don't really get to know it. So you try to make a firm intention that you're going to stay right here and be consistently with the breath.

And try to protect that intention. A lot of other intentions are going to come along, and you have to keep remembering: no, you're not going to play with them. It's like your old friends see that you've got a lot of free time right now, and they're going to come out and want to play with you. But you know what your old friends are like. They take you around the block, and there's really nothing to show for it. You want a friend who can really help you. A friend who will point you to worthwhile things, as it says in the chant. A lot of your old friends were friends in ruinous fun. So you've got to keep reminding yourself, one, you're going to stay with the breath, and two, you're not going to get involved with those other friends.

It helps strengthen that intention to stay with the breath if you can notice how it feels good, so be very sensitive to how the breathing feels: where you sense it in the body, whether they're comfortable sensations, uncomfortable sensations, where it feels light, where it feels heavy, where it feels trapped, where it feels like it's flowing smoothly. Take some time to investigate this breath property in the body. You'll begin to notice that it's not just the sensation of air coming in and out through the nose. There's a rise and fall in the chest. There's a rise and fall in the abdomen. There are very subtle sensations of flow all throughout the body: over the shoulders, down the arms, out to the fingers, down the back, out the legs to the tips of the toes, in the torso. Keep reminding yourself that if you really want to understand this breath energy in the body and get the most out of it, you've got to spend a lot of time with it. The mind does have this tendency to want to jump around, network with his friend, network with that friend, check up on this one, see how they're doing, watch out for any trouble that's going to come along.

This is a hindrance they call restlessness and anxiety, the part of the mind that says you've got to keep jumping around from here or there to make sure all the fronts are covered. Sometimes that's a useful policy, but not always. Especially not right now. You want to train the mind in a new skill, the skill of staying with something really useful, something really skillful, something taking you deeper inside.

It's unlike a lot of the thoughts we think. The breath is here all the time. As long as we're alive, the breath is coming in and going out, or even when it's a still breath, it's breath energy all the same. It's something you can focus on continually. It's an object you can really melt into. Otherwise, you're always tensed up, pulling back, poised to leap. As soon as a thought gets uninteresting or unpleasant, or you just get tired of it, you jump. And as soon as you land on another thought, part of you has already tensed up to make the next jump. But tell yourself, "Here's a place where you don't have to jump up. You can stay here. Relax. You make this your home."

This is one of the traditional terms for getting the mind in concentration: *vihāra-dhamma*, a quality that forms a home for the mind, a place where you feel that you can stay comfortably. It's like having a true friend who will never let you down.

In Thai they talk about your eating friends, the ones that you have a good time with, and then the friends who are willing to die for you, who will stick with you through thick and thin, and help even you when you die. That's the kind of friend the breath can be, but you have to be that kind of friend to it, too. In other words, you have to stick with it long periods of time. Otherwise, it's very shy and doesn't show all of its potential. So be patient, quiet. It's like making friends with a wild animal. Wild animals are very wary. But with enough patience and enough kindness and enough interest, being really observant and watching for long periods of time, you can get so that the wild animals will approach you.

I heard of a meditation teacher back east who would go out in the woods behind her house. She would stand very still with birdseed in her hand. She did this long enough that eventually the wild birds would come and eat right out of her hand. She had to learn how to relax into her standing positions so that it wasn't tense, didn't wear her out to stand there, and finally get used to resting in that posture.

In the same way, find a spot in the body where you feel that you can easily settle down and stay here. It might be in the middle of the head, the middle of the chest, the abdomen, anywhere in the body where you feel that your attention can settle in, settle down, and begin to fit together. All the scattered little parts of your mind come together and they click into place.

So you're fully here with the breath. You can fully observe it, get more acquainted with it, in all its many aspects. After all, the breath isn't just in and out. There's the breath energy that flows up as you breathe in; there's the breath energy that flows down as you breathe in. If it flows up too much, you tend to get a headache. If it flows down too much, you get drowsy. So try to balance things.

There's breath energy that comes in from the back, breath energy that comes in from the front. As you get more sensitive to it, you begin to realize there is breath energy that's constantly waiting to come into the pores of your skin, so that you don't have to pull it in. The more the different energies in the body get connected, the less you have to breathe. They nourish one another. They connect with one another, so that the body can get more and more still, and the mind can experience an even greater sensation of stillness.

There's a lot to learn here, a lot to get acquainted with. Just watch out for those old friends who want to come and play, or who make demands on you. They've pretty much shown you all they have to offer, so there's nothing really new there. When you catch yourself running off with one, ask yourself, "What do you want out of this? What do you expect out of this?" It's pretty rare that a really new and original thought is going to come along as you meditate. Most the time, it's just the same old stuff over and over again. And even if it is new and original, tell yourself, this is not the time for that. Just let it go. Let it go.

Ajaan Fuang used to say that if any insights come up in the meditation, you don't have to jot them down. You don't have to memorize them. If they're really genuine insights, they'll do their work right here and now, and they'll stick with you. If they're not helpful right now, then just let them go. If they're not really genuine, why do you have to memorize them? What insight is all about is that it opens you up to see things in the mind that you hadn't understood before: patterns that control the mind, and it also shows you the way to get free of them. So if the insight doesn't free you right now, just let it go. It's not the right time or place for that insight. You just stay with the breath.

As you do that, the breath will develop a sense of ease, a sense of fullness, refreshment. Allow that ease and fullness to spread through the different parts of the body. See if you can maintain it all the way through the in-breath, all the way through the out-, so that you don't squeeze the breath out too much, and you don't pull it too harshly when it comes in. Find that point of connectedness where all the breath energies in the body link up with one another, a point of balance. Allow yourself just to melt into it, without a sense of your being in one part of the body and the breath being another part of the body. That separateness begins to dissolve. Everything comes together as a sense of Oneness. This brings the mind to deeper stage of concentration, to an even greater sense of refreshment and fullness.

So these are some of the things you want to explore. Don't think of the breath as being tedious, because you're going to miss a lot of the subtleties if you do. The mind will jump off someplace else, it'll run off in with its old friends. But you've

seen enough for those old friends. Now it's time for one really big new friend, one who has lots to offer. It'll lead to a sense of well-being and peace that you can't really find anywhere else.

So try to strengthen your resolve, strengthen your intention to develop this friendship. Be sensitive. Be observant. Watch for long periods of time. Anyone else comes along and suggests you want to go place someplace else? You say, "Not now, not now; maybe some other time, but not now. We've got something more interesting to do, something more rewarding."

So keep your intention clear. Keep it solid. Keep your commitment to yourself clear: why you're here, what's important and what's not. A sense of priorities is an important part of the meditation. It's not just a technique. There's a set of values that goes along with the technique, reminding you that true happiness comes from a trained mind. True happiness comes from what they call admirable friends. That applies both to friends outside and the kind of friendship you develop inside, the friendship you develop with mindfulness and alertness, the friendship you develop with the breath. All of the practice lies in developing these good friendships as much you can.