A Solid Support

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The Pali word for the object of the mind is aramana, which actually means “support.” A lot of the potential foundations for the mind are pretty rickety, and so we’re used to jumping from one to another. A lot of the skill in meditation is learning how to make the breath solid and continuous enough to really be a support for the mind. It’s a place where you can take your stance and feel secure. An important part of the meditation is getting used to being here with the breath, that this is your standpoint, regardless of what the situation is around you or inside the mind. This is where you take your stance. Think of it in terms of Thai boxing. Every move has to come from a solid stance for it to have strength. In your dealings with the world, you have to come from a solid stance as well. You can’t be floating around and hope to withstand heavy things when they suddenly come in. Or when they suddenly come welling up from within the mind. Because if your stance is wavering, then whatever you’re going to do to deal with that situation is going to be wavering as well. It’s going to be weak as well. So this is one of the reasons why we try to stick with the breath and come back to the breath again and again and again. And not only that, but make the breath a good place to stay, a good, solid, continuous sense of ease. John Lee talks about the tough breath, or the resilient breath. Try to breathe in such a way that there are no gaps in the breath energy in the body. So the breath is one continuous flow coming in, one continuous flow going out, and there are no places where you squeeze it off. There will be a tendency in the mind to squeeze off the breath energy in different parts of the body. You get really sensitive to your body as you go through the day. You’ll notice that when there’s a sudden surprise, a sudden bit of fear or anger, there’ll be parts of the breath energy that you squeeze off, close them off. Those are your weak points. You can make it one of your exercises throughout the day. Once you’ve identified a particular weak point, you’re going to keep it open and continuous and smooth. Keep the breath energy at that place, open, continuous, and smooth, as continually as you can, regardless of what’s happening outside. You turn your weak point into a strong point, because it is your sensitive point. It might be around the neck, in the chest, in the stomach. It’s up to you to identify where your weak points are, the points that you tend to squeeze off as soon as there’s fear or surprise. Or any sudden emotional reaction. Learn how to breathe in and breathe out so that you’re not squeezing that point. Give it a sense of being open and full. Then keep tabs on it. That can be one way of carrying the meditation into the rest of your day. You’re going to have this one point that you’re going to follow all day long. So you can catch yourself when you slip up and start squeezing it again. This way, the breath is provided with a good, solid place to stay, so it can have a good stance, a stance that’s balanced and secure. It is the place where you stand, and then you deal with other objects in life. You don’t want to stand on them. This is where you stand and you deal with them, like a juggler. The juggler stands on the floor and then juggles his items, the balls or whatever, to try to keep in the air. For most of us, meditation is just one more ball that we try to keep in the air, along with other interests. It just adds one more thing to think about. But if you think of it as the spot where you stand, and then everything comes from this spot. If you’re going to do anything or say anything or think anything, try to make it come from this spot. You find your sensitive spot and learn how to keep it full and unwavering. Then you’re less likely to feel threatened by events as they arise in the course of the day—things that would surprise you, things that would otherwise knock you off balance. It’s always a wise tactic. Whatever your skill is, if you notice that you have a weak point, focus on strengthening that point. Then you find yourself raising the level of other points, other skills, in your practice. Because you don’t always have to keep compensating for these places where you feel weak and threatened. So learn to sensitize yourself to how you manage the breath energy and the body throughout the day. How you breathe in, how you breathe out, so you can maintain a sense of fullness all the way through the out-breath. You find yourself, as you get to the end of the out-breath, squeezing a little bit. Okay, you’ve gone too far. Or if it feels forced as you breathe in. Sometimes that may be needed. I’ve found that when you have a headache, it’s good to breathe really intensely. Breathe in as much as you can and then out as much as you can, again and again and again. At the very least, you’re adding more oxygen to the blood. And I’ve often found that helps to alleviate a headache. But other times you don’t want to force things too much, trying to find the rhythm that’s good for the body right now, without putting too much pressure on it, without getting too weak. Developing this sense of just right and maintaining that sense of just right as continuously as you can. This way you carry the skills of your seated meditation into the rest of your life, which is where you really need them. It’s not the case that defilements will arise only while you’re sitting here with your eyes closed. As we all know, they arise in full force any time at all. And so you want to be prepared for them. You’re not caught off guard. As you develop more and more of this sense of continuity, you get into that feeling of timelessness that Ajahn Foon talked about. He said, “For most of us, we divide our days into times. There’s the time to eat, and the time to talk, and the time to meditate, and the time to do this and do that. It all gets chopped up into little times. And the chopping up breaks up whatever momentum might be developing in your practice. If you can think of it always as time to be with the breath, and then the other activities come second to being with the breath, then you develop a quality of timelessness. It’s one time all the way through. And that way the practice builds up momentum. So as you go through the day, try to be as strict with yourself about distractions and the wandering mind as you would be when you’re sitting here with your eyes closed. That’s what’s meant by heedfulness. Because defilements can arise at any time, and you don’t want to be caught with your guard down. You want to be ready for them, standing at a good place where your foundation is solid. So that whatever you do from that stance is done with strength.

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