

## *The Ennobling Path*

*December 19, 2003*

Try to take stock of what you've got right here, right now. There's a sensation of the body sitting here, and the sensation of the breathing. There's awareness, and there are the thoughts and labels that awareness is putting on things. There are feelings. Try to leave it at just that level. Put these things together in the present moment and don't add anything else.

You'll find, of course, that the mind is constantly adding other things, but if you notice these are things piling up in the mind, just clear them away. There's just the breath coming in, going out: That's your sensation of the body. You label the breath coming in, label the breath going out, and there's a feeling either of comfort or discomfort that goes along with the breath. Try to keep things at just that level. Make that your frame of reference. As for any ideas of who you are or what you're doing here or what you've been doing and what you're going to do in the future, just let those fall away, because if you clutter up what you've got right here, right now, with these other things, you can't see what you've got right here right now.

This is a very important principle in the teaching. We're here to deal precisely with the issue of suffering, stress, this discomfort in the present moment that you're going to find if you look very carefully. If you don't look carefully, you go off and build other things, and you end up creating more suffering, more stress, which gets pushed into the back of your mind because you're more interested in those other worlds you create. You've got narratives of your experience, what actually has happened, what you hope will happen. Or you can have whole worlds of other kinds build up in the mind that distract you from the real issue at hand, which is the fact that there is suffering and stress, the question about why it's caused, what you can do about it, what can be done about it, right here in the present moment.

This is why the Buddha refused to answer questions whether the world is eternal, the world is non-eternal, whether it was finite or infinite, whether the body was the same as the soul, whether the soul was separate from the body: all the big issues the philosophers liked to talk about in his day. He was radical. He said those issues were totally irrelevant. The big issue is the fact that there's suffering, and people are creating for themselves by being unskillful.

We want to focus on this issue. This is where you focus: simply what you've got, right here right now, without adding anything, without taking anything away, just looking at things as they're directly experienced.

For most of us, we can stay here for a little while, but then our old habits kick in. We start creating this issue, start creating that issue, and all that does is just covers things up. So as soon as these other issues come into the mind, notice them as events in the present moment. They'll come in as little signposts that say: Look there, look there. They'll draw your attention away. As long as you realize that it's just a signpost and don't let yourself get tricked into looking in line with the arrow, you're okay. It comes and goes. You're aware of it as an event, not as a world you want to get into.

So we're sitting here watching events in the present moment. In fact, that's all there is: events in the present moment. But they have this trick of turning into signposts, creating other worlds. Even though the act of creating another world is something that's going on in the present moment, once you get in that frame of reference, you seem to be someplace else at some other time. There's a moment of blanking out before you shift frames, so try to watch for that. The more consistently you can be aware of the breath, the more consistently you can aware of how the mind is staying with the breath, then the less likelihood there is for those worlds to get created, for you to change your frame of reference and go off someplace else for a while.

This practice goes against a lot of the mind's habits. After all, the mind is a creator. It keeps cooking things up. Once there's craving, then there's going to be clinging. Once there's clinging, then there's the creation of these worlds that the mind likes to inhabit. It keeps forgetting that as soon as you inhabit them, they start falling apart, and you've got to get out. You go back and you create another one, and then another, and another. The process just keeps going. The question is, are you ever going to learn the lesson that there's no true happiness to be found there?

The reason we look for true happiness there is because we think that this is all there is. We've never seen the happiness that the Buddha promises in terms of nibbana. The only escape we can see from the discomfort in the present is to run away from the present into the past or future. But you can never really run away for long. You've got to keep coming back, coming back.

What we're doing as we're meditating is looking here to see if there's a different way of dealing with it, looking at things directly as they are, as they happen. As the Buddha said, when you break down the present moment in this way, you see nothing but dhammas. The world *dhamma* here can mean

phenomenon, it can mean event, it can mean activity, or the way of looking at things as is directly experienced. However you want to conceive that term of *dhamma* is fine, as long as you're right with things as they're experienced, the movements of the mind simply as movements: looking at what's here, not adding anything, not taking anything away, trying to bring the mind to singleness, a sense of being one here in the present moment, instead of being scattered about in little bits and pieces.

When the mind settles down, try to get it to stay there. This is one of the aspects of the path. The Buddha says that you develop the path. The heart of the path is right concentration, so you want to develop that. Concentration has to stay with this frame of reference, this is why right mindfulness is always used as a predecessor for right concentration. Right mindfulness is what establishes our frame of reference: Here we are with the body in and of itself, feelings in and of themselves. The "in and of themselves" is the important part. They don't turn into other things. You're directly here with the experience you've got.

Then maintain that level as your frame of reference. The longer you can maintain it, that "in and of itself" develops the quality of concentration. If you maintain it with skill, adjusting things so that it's a good place to stay, then the mind can settle down. Once it settles down, then allow it to stay there.

Maintaining it is a difficult part of the practice. Anyone can look at the breath for a little while, but looking at it for long extended periods of time is what makes a real difference in the mind. It's a little bit, a little bit, but over time the little bits add up. The continuity is what keeps that frame of reference going, so that you don't lose track, you don't miss things that are happening right here in the present moment.

This is where the ignorance is that they talk about as a cause of suffering. It's in those little gaps in your awareness, lapses in mindfulness. Interesting things happen there, but we black out for just a moment, then we come back. But in the meantime, a lot has happened. Those are the dhammas, the phenomena, you really want to look for. What happens when the mind pulls a curtain over part of itself? This is what the maintaining is: trying to keep everything open and aware.

Once you maintain it, then look for where there's some disturbance, even in the concentration, because as the Buddha says, there are lots of levels of concentration. They get more and more subtle, with less and less of a feeling of disturbance, less and less of a feeling of burdensomeness in the mind. As the mind gets settled in, as it gets the opportunity to stay here for a good while, you begin to get more sensitive to what you did to get the mind here and what you're doing to keep it staying here, but now you really don't have to, because it's begun to settle

in. With certain factors of the concentration—such as having to keep reminding yourself to stay with the breath or having to evaluate the breath—there comes a point when they're no longer necessary. The breath feels good coming in; the breath feels good going out. You can really bore into the breath and feel like you're penetrating it. There's a sense of oneness with the body, breath, and mind. At that point you don't have to keep reminding yourself. Ajaan Fuang's example is of a water buffalo. You've got to call your water buffalo if it's going away. But once it's back, you don't call again. It's here, so you can stop calling it. That's one little disturbance you can drop.

You keep going through the layers like this, settling in for a while, and then you begin to see that something you're doing or something that's going on in the meditation is really no longer necessary. You can still stay here without doing that, so you drop it.

All these factors—being with things simply as they are, looking for whatever disturbances there are and allowing yourself drop that disturbance, watching what's going on without adding anything or taking anything away: All of this is called dwelling in emptiness, or taking emptiness as a dwelling for the mind. You're not creating narratives out of your experience, you're not creating worldviews, you're just looking at things as they're directly experienced and allowing the mind to come to a sense of unity, a sense of oneness as you're looking. That's your dwelling. The emptiness lies in clearing away any sense of disturbance, and also clearing away any additions that you would give to the present moment that don't really have to in order to stay there.

So that whatever level of concentration you can maintain, work at keeping it going until you realize there are few things you're doing that are not necessary.

It's like learning to walk. You notice, when the child starts walking, that a lot of its motions are unnecessary. The child hasn't figured out which muscles are really necessary for walking, which ones are not, so it tends to use too many. And of course it gets worn out. Because one, the muscles aren't really developed that way and, two, it's using too many. But over time, it gets a better and better sense of which ones are necessary, which ones are not. The necessary ones get stronger so that they can start taking over. The unnecessary ones don't have to be involved in the walking at all, so they can rest.

In the same way, meditation is progressively a matter of letting go of unnecessary burdens.

So this teaching on dwelling in emptiness, even though it's basically a concentration teaching, is also an insight teaching as well. You look for the disturbance—whatever changes, whatever is stressful—and that's two of the three

characteristics right there. Then you let go. You don't try to create any sense of "you" around it. You don't create anything more there. You don't add anything to it; you don't take anything away. That's the essence of the teaching on not-self. It's simply a matter of staying with the stillness as it gets more and more developed so that you can see more and more precisely where those unnecessary burdens are, where the disturbances are.

In the beginning, the emphasis is more on trying to maintain the oneness and not lose your frame of reference. As you develop, the emphasis switches more and more to the discernment side. But the two are not really separate. It's simply a question of emphasis for the mind to work through that problem of suffering and stress, to comprehend the suffering, to understand the path, as we chanted just now. Not only do you have to understand the path, but you also have to develop it. It requires both the qualities of serenity and concentration on the one hand, and the qualities of insight and discernment on the other. They go hand-in-hand.

This is a different kind of discernment from the one we use in normal everyday activities. It's one that penetrates the concentration, one that goes along with the concentration, and is devoted to making the concentration more and more solid, keeping you right here in the present moment as much as possible. This means that discernment does things. It just doesn't sit there and watch. It actually helps to create this sense of stillness, create the unity that we want to work on. It ultimately turns around and looks at the whole process of creating the concentration, taking it apart. That opens up to something totally other, totally different from what's gone before.

But the process itself—looking for the disturbance, letting go of the things that cause that disturbance once you've got your basic framework of being here in the present moment: That's what the work is, no matter what the level your concentration, what the level of your discernment. You want to develop a 360-degree vision so that you can see wherever that level of disturbance is and what's going along with it, what you can let go of.

This is what the path is all about, the path that allows you to comprehend suffering, which is comprehending those disturbances, letting go of the cause, and also realizing the end of suffering. You're comprehending what's conditioned and ultimately it opens you up to be aware of the unconditioned as well.

This is why the path is said to be noble. It starts with ordinary everyday things, and it turns them into something noble. It starts with the breath, starts with your own awareness, your feelings, your perceptions, your consciousness, and turns them into something that can take you to another dimension entirely. In that way, it could be called an ennobling path. It takes these normal things that we

use to create our experiences, create our sense of self, and it turns them into something better, gives them a more noble purpose.

But to make these things noble, you have to look at precisely what you really have right here, right now. Try not to lose sight of that frame of reference; try not to lose touch with it. The more clearly you can see what you've got right here, right now, the easier it is to make something noble out of it.