

## *The Path Requires Effort*

*July 12, 2005*

One of the basic principles of the practice is that it's through effort that you overcome suffering and stress. We don't like to hear that. We prefer that all you do is just let go, let go, relax, and that's the end of it. But it doesn't work that way. The path, as the Buddha describes it, as one of developing as well as one of letting go. You have to have both sides. An important part of right effort is developing the desire to do the building and developing as well as the desire to do the letting go.

First, while you're practicing with the breath, focus your attention on where the breath seems most obvious, so that you know: Now the breath is going in; now the breath is going out. And stick with it. It's the sticking-with-it that makes all the difference. Sometimes you hear people say, "I've done a little concentration. I know what it's like and I want to go beyond it. I don't want to be attached to it." You've got to be attached. You've got to have a desire for the concentration. You've got to respect for concentration if you really want to get results out of your path.

So when so the mind wanders off, you bring it right back. Wanders off again, bring it back again. If it starts complaining, "I don't like bringing it back," just bring it back. You have to show more respect for the concentration than you do for your moods. The mind may start complaining, "This is dumb, just looking at the breath. Why can't we think about things that are more interesting?" Well, this is the groundwork. This is the foundation. If the foundation isn't strong, then all of the thinking you do will just crash, like a building without a foundation. The slightest little earthquake, the slightest little breeze, the whole thing comes tumbling down.

Foundation work may not be all that interesting, but it's necessary. It's like building this monastery. For the first several years, most of the work went underground: bringing in pipes, digging for the septic system. All the stuff went down underground, all that money went down underground, and people kept saying, "We've given all this money, we've done all this work, what do we have to show for it?" Well, it wasn't for show. It was all underground. But now that it's underground, we can start building on top of it. Without the groundwork, you might have huts, but you wouldn't have a place to go to the bathroom. You wouldn't have water properly piped in. So it wouldn't be livable.

So even though it's unromantic and unexciting, it's still necessary work. And you have to respect the necessary work, because actually, in the process of getting the mind to settle down, you learn a lot of interesting things about the mind, just through this effort of coming back, coming back. You learn a lot of unexpected things about the mind. It's easy to read books about Buddhism and say, "Well, ultimately you have to learn to let go of your sense of self, so let's just do that now and not bother with the other stuff." But it doesn't work that way. When you actually bring the mind to concentration, you find other things getting in the way that are a lot more pressing. You've got to deal with those first, before you can get to the subtler stuff.

So when the mind wanders off and you bring it back, don't think of this as being tedious. There's an opportunity for learning here. To begin with, you learn some finesse in how to bring the mind back to the breath in a way that it likes coming back. This is why it's important to make the breath comfortable. As you sit here focusing on the breath, notice: Is the way you're focusing on the breath making it tight and constricted? If so, you've got to loosen up a little bit. Otherwise, the mind won't want to come back.

And as you breathe in and out, exactly where do you feel the breath? Is it just air coming in and out of the nose? Or are there other sensations in the body that go along with the in-breath, other sensations that go along with the out-breath? Those can be anywhere in the body. The way you hold the body to breathe can create either a great sense of ease or a lot of tension. Your internal mental picture of your body, your internal mental picture of your breathing: Have you ever really explored those? And how do those mental pictures affect the way you breathe? How do they affect your posture?

As the Buddha said, it's possible simply by being with the breath to have a sense of ease and rapture filling the whole body. Is your breath anything like that? If not, there are several ways you can change it. You can make it longer, shorter, deeper, or more shallow. Think of it coming in and out from different parts the body. Think of it not so much as air coming and out, but more as energy flowing through the body. In what ways does the energy flow so that it feels good, and in what ways does it flow that it doesn't feel so good?

There's a story of Hakuin, the Zen master who, after years of meditating, complained of what he called Zen sickness. But it's not just Zen people who get it. A lot of meditators get it. As soon as you focus on the breath, there's pressure up in your head. It's because you're pulling all the energy in your body up into the head and it's getting stuck there. You've got to think of its settling down, melting down into your legs, your arms, your heads. What causes that Zen sickness is the

way you tense up and pull up as you breathe in. It may be conscious; it may be subconscious. But if you work with the breath, you finally get more and more conscious of what you're doing, and you begin to see how these things happen. As you get more grounded in the body, you get more and more at home with the spot where the mind and the body meet at the breath—because it's right here that you're going to see interesting things not only about the body but also about the mind.

In particular, you're going to see more and more how the mind creates unnecessary suffering for itself. You begin seeing that as you deal with the breath. Your preconceived notions about the breath can create unnecessary suffering in the breathing. As the Buddha said, you can breathe in such a way that the whole body feels refreshed and full, just breathing. So you've got to see what's standing in the way of that. Part of the solution will be letting go, but part of it will be developing: developing things like mindfulness, alertness—developing the desire to stick with it.

Sometimes we're told that the Buddha said desire is a bad thing, a cause for suffering. Well, certain desires are a cause for suffering, and other desires are part of the path to its cessation. The desire to let go of unskillful habits in the mind, unskillful qualities in the mind, the desire to develop skillful qualities in the mind: These are all an essential part of right effort. In fact, the whole practice comes down to this issue of looking for what's the most skillful thing to do right now, what's going to get the best results, and then being willing to do whatever it takes.

If you have some preconceived notions about, "I'm this kind of person, I can't do that kind of action or this kind of practice" or whatever, you're limiting yourself. The question is not, "Who am I? What is the real me? What kind of person am I?" Just put those issues aside, because the real questions are: "What's the most skillful thing to do right now? How can I figure out how to do it? And if I don't want to do it, what can I do to cajole myself into doing it?"

Whether it's a matter of what you do or you say or think or how you're focusing on the breath right here right now, be willing to experiment. Use your ingenuity and then observe. Those are the two words my teacher Ajaan Fuang used almost more than any others in his meditation instructions. Ingenuity. Observe. When you come across an obstacle, try to figure out a way around it. Try various approaches and observe what works, what doesn't work.

This way, the meditation becomes a skill. And once it's a skill, it can really be a good foundation for other things. In other words, you can tap into a state of concentration, you can tap into this state of being centered, whenever you want it.

You can learn how to maintain it throughout the day: as you walk, as you talk, as you do your work. Try to make this your home.

So you're making an effort to build up skillful qualities and you're letting go of unskillful ones. That's what the path is all about. The effort starts with having the desire to do this. If you don't have the desire, work on developing the desire, being persistent, being intent. Give your full attention to this one big issue, the one that the Buddha said was all he taught: stress and the end of stress. Once you take care of this issue, you've taken care of everything else. And you do that through right effort in developing the desire and persistence and the intent to let go of unskillful qualities in the mind, to prevent unskillful ones that haven't arisen yet from arising, to give rise to skillful qualities, and then to develop them when they have arisen. That's the kind of effort that will put an end to suffering and stress.

So learn to apply that attitude to the breath, right here right now. That's going to be your foundation.