

## *Respect for Concentration*

*September 29, 2006*

Focus on your breath. Just be with the breath as it comes in, as it goes out. And the next time it comes and goes out, remind yourself to stay with the breath. Try to get sensitive to how the breath feels. What does a long breath feel like? What does a short breath feel like? Which feels better? Experiment. You can try experimenting with deep or shallow breathing, fast or slow breathing, heavy or light. There are lots of different breaths to experiment with. Try to sensitize yourself to this part of your awareness. It's an area that we tend to block out, but it has lots of potential.

So take some time to explore that potential. As for where it's going to take you, and how long it's going to take you, just put those questions aside. An old image is of farmers: You plant the seed and you can't be in too great a hurry for the seed to sprout and grow. You know it's going to take time. So you do what you can. You tend to it in the meantime. That's what mindfulness and alertness are about. Mindfulness is to keep reminding you to stay here. Alertness is watching to see what's going on. And you make little adjustments as you go.

If you find any ways of breathing that are uncomfortable or make the mind either too sleepy or too edgy, just drop those. Look after the kinds of breathing that are helpful. Don't be too quick to throw everything away. We hear about the path as being a path of letting go, but it's also a path of developing. And developing requires some appreciation of the little things you're getting along the path. Give them space to grow.

That's what respect for concentration is all about. If you're in too great a hurry to go on to the next step or the next stage, you tend to lose what you've got. Look after what you've got, and it'll have a chance to grow.

The classic instructions on breath mindfulness, have 16 steps. And you think "Wow, 16! I'd better get going!" But the Buddha divides them up into four sets of four, and each set, he says, can provide the basis for awakening. Even just the first four: being sensitive to long breathing, being sensitive to short breathing, then, as he says, being aware the whole body as you breathe in, as you breathe out, although it's best to wait till you get the breath really comfortable. Then think, "whole body breathing in, whole body breathing out." Then allow the breath to calm down. Whatever other ways you might will the practice, just allow them to be set aside. Try to be sensitive to what really feels good right now. Where there

are any places where you're creating too much stress and strain in the breathing process, allow them to relax.

Just seeing that much is enough to develop some of the factors of awakening. You've got mindfulness, and then there's what's called analysis of qualities, seeing what's skillful and unskillful. You can see that right now in how you relate to the breathing. When you see that, it gives rise to a sense of rapture that's based on developing skillful breaths and skillful attitudes, and letting go of unskillful ones. From there you go to serenity, concentration, equanimity—all the factors of awakening. You can build them right here just on these four little steps.

So appreciate these things. They're not much, but they have a lot of potential if you pay attention, if you learn how to appreciate them. Don't be in too great a hurry to push through the steps, because some of them take time. It's like seeing little tiny fruits on your tree. You say, "Ah, the fruits are here," so you pick them all. It turns out they're not ripe yet. So you end up with nothing to eat and you've also prevented yourself from getting something good because you were in too great a hurry.

So notice what's comfortable in the present moment and what's uncomfortable, and tend to the comfortable sensations. Those are going to be your friends. Those can act as a foundation for the larger things you want to build, the larger things you want to develop. It's like that image in the Canon of the foolish and inexperienced cow. It's standing on a meadow on this hill, where it's got water and grass. It looks over to another hill and sees water and grass on that hill. It says, "Gee, I wonder what the water and grass are like over there." And because it's foolish and inexperienced, it goes down into the ravine between the hills and gets stuck. Then it can't get back even to the first meadow, much less go to the second.

Now, the experienced cow knows that if you stay right here in this meadow, the grass will grow. The water is clear. You've got everything you need right here. So stay right here, and it'll develop. After all, the Buddha was right here, and he gained awakening right here at his breath. Simply that he'd been training his mind to be very observant and to act on what he had observed. You may observe things, but if you don't act on what you observe, you'll never learn whether your observations are right or not.

That's what he had done. He had observed things and then put them to the test: "Is what I observed really right?" He saw what was right, saw what was wrong, seeing what worked, by putting it into practice. Again it was just this little area right here, where the mind is right at the breath. He learned to be very observant here. And part of that was learning to stay with it. When the Buddha

talks about concentration, it's always a matter getting the mind to settle down and allowing it to indulge in whatever sense of ease is there without forgetting the topic of concentration. Just learn how to maintain it, stick with it.

You can think of it as medicine, a cream you put on your skin. The cream has to stay there for long periods of time if it's going to heal your itch. When you learn how to stay with the breath, when you learn how to watch it, it's like walking back and forth, back and forth, back and forth on one little path. You get to know it really well. You give it a chance to show what it has to offer.

So it may not seem like much—just the breath coming in, the breath going out—but you can develop a lot of good qualities of mind just staying with this in-and-out breath, getting sensitive to it, and then training yourself to be aware of the whole body breathing in, the whole body breathing out, training yourself to allow the breath sensations to calm down. Any intentional part of the breath, just allow that to calm down. Let the breath be on its own to come in, go out, wherever it's going to come in, wherever it's going to go out, in whatever way it feels good.

That can be a foundation for all kinds of good things. So focus on your foundation. Don't build a rickety foundation and say, "Okay, what's next?" You want to build a good solid foundation and stay there. Fortunately, it's not like a house, where you build a foundation and then you've got to find a lot of other things to put on top of it. This kind of foundation is more organic. It grows if you give it a chance.

So show some respect for concentration. That's the only way you can learn what it has to offer.