

Get Real

Thanissaro Bhikkhu

October 4, 2003

When you come to practice meditation, tell yourself that you've left all your baggage at the door. You don't have to carry it in here. All of your thoughts about what you've done today, what you're going to do tomorrow, anything past or future: Tell yourself that those things aren't relevant right now.

What's relevant is what you're immediately sensing right now. And what is there? There's the sensation of the body and the sensation of the breath coming in and going out. As for the other sense doors, you can close them down. Your eyes are closed; you can even close your ears. You don't have to listen to the Dhamma talk. As I've said many times before, the Dhamma talk is here as a fence. If you leave the breath, you run into the fence. Go back to the breath. Don't let the talk interfere with your breathing. Allow the body to relax.

Ajaan Suwat once noted that there's a paradox in what we're trying to develop as we get the mind to settle down. On the one hand, the texts talk about making the mind soft and malleable. On the other hand, they talk about making it strong—strong in the sense that you're not going to get waylaid by other thoughts. You're going to stay focused right here on the breath, focused right here on the immediate sensation of the body no matter what else happens. Try to elaborate that as little as possible. Stay just with the direct sensation: the breath coming in, the breath going out. You feel it right here, and you feel the different sensations in the body that let you know where your legs are, where your arms are, where your head is. Don't try to fill in anything more than what you actually sense. That's a good exercise in self-honesty right there.

Ordinarily we bring a lot of ideas into the present moment: perceptions about the shape of the body, about how we should breathe, about where we should be feeling the sensation of the breathing. If you really look, though, you see how fabricated those ideas are. If you let them go, what have you got left? Explore. When you do, you find things softening up a bit. A lot of the tension with which you hold the body to make it fit in with your preconceived notions of what you *should* be feeling right now, gets put aside. As you allow yourself to become more and more sensitive to what you're feeling, the tension in the body can begin to relax. You're not here trying to prove anything or to force anything. You're here to explore: What have you got right here right now?

If there's a sensation of tension or tightness in any part of the body, allow it to disperse. You can think of the breath as a means of clearing out that tension. In other words, you breathe through it as you breathe in, and you allow it to go out with the breath, or simply to dissolve, as you breathe out. As you let go of the tension in the body, your sense of the body here in the present moment, your

sense of awareness here in the present moment, begins to open up. That's the softness, the malleability, that we're aiming for in the state of concentration.

As for the strength, that lies in not allowing yourself to get waylaid. Other thoughts are going to come in. That's something you can expect to happen, so don't get worked up about it. The trick lies in letting them go right through you. Think of your awareness of the body as a big window screen, with lots of little holes. They're porous. When a sound comes in, when a thought comes in, whatever comes in, just let it go right through. You don't have to catch it, just as a screen doesn't catch the wind. This way you can combine that sense of being tender, softened up, more malleable, with the strength. The strength lies in the wires in the screen, in that they don't get blown away by what's coming through. The softness lies in the holes, in the porous nature of your awareness that allows things through.

When the breath comes in and goes out, it can come in and go out anywhere in the body at all. So experiment and explore to see how that feels. What breathing feels best right now? Look into it. There's long breathing, slow breathing, fast breathing, short breathing, hot, cool and warm breathing – like the porridge in the story of Goldilocks. You have all kinds of choices, but what you want is the one that's just right. You're not trying to program yourself or force yourself into a particular mold. The recommendations of the technique are there to give you guidance in your exploration, to give you a sense of direction in what you're doing. But the things you're going to see depend on your own powers of observation as you adjust the breath, as you adjust your focus.

That act of adjusting is the beginning of discernment. You begin to see connections: cause and effect. When you choose to breathe in a certain way, certain sensations are going to result, either pleasurable or painful. That's the law of karma right there: seeing how things arise and pass away, seeing the *connections* between what you do and the feelings that arise and pass away as a result.

When the texts describe the insight that leads to the first stage of Awakening, they express it as seeing this: *All that's subject to origination is subject to cessation.* That's an insight both into change and into causal connections underlying change. The Pali word for "origination," *samudaya*, refers to the way things arise together with their causes. As you go deeper into the meditation, this insight grows deeper and becomes more all-encompassing, but it starts with precisely this act of adjusting: changing your perceptions and intentions a little bit here, a little bit there, seeing what feelings result, and trying to be observant as possible, as sensitive as possible, to what's really happening, to what's connected with what.

This is why you're told not to force the breath, but to allow it to come in and go out comfortably and then to monitor it to see what feels best. Learn to listen to things as they come into being. This was characteristic of the Buddha as he sought Awakening: to see things as they come into being. He didn't try blindly to

force things in line with a lot of preconceived notions. He was more of an explorer, trying different approaches and seeing what results came about. Ultimately he found what worked best in the sense of putting an end to all suffering and then recommended that method for us to follow. He set out all the basic principles but left the details for us to observe for ourselves in our laboratory right here: the body sitting here, breathing in and out.

In other words, we're sitting here trying to follow his method, not just trying to clone the results. We follow the method he proposed for learning the truths that lie within us. But to get the best results requires developing your own sensitivity, your own awareness, and seeing what precisely, really, is there.

Recently I've been looking through a field guide on nature observation. The author, when he was a child, was trained by an old Native American. One day the child asked the old man, "Why is it that you're not afraid of heat and cold?"

The old man looked at him for a while and finally said, "Because they're real."

And this is our job as meditators: to try to learn not to be afraid of things that are real.

Ultimately, we discover that things that are real pose no danger to the mind. The real dangers in the mind are our delusions, the things we make up, the things we use to cover up reality, the stories, the preconceived notions we impose on things. When we're trying to live in those stories and notions, reality is threatening. It's always exposing the cracks in our ideas, the cracks in our ignorance, the cracks in our desires. As long as we identify with those make-believe desires, we find that threatening. But if we learn to become real people ourselves, then reality poses no dangers.

This is what the meditation is for, teaching yourself how to be real, to get in touch with what's really going on, to look at your sense of who you are and take it apart in terms of what it really is, to look at the things that you find threatening in your life and see what they really are. When you really look, you see the truth. *If you're true in your looking, the truth appears.*

This is an important principle in the practice. This is why the Dhamma is so precious. Only people who are true can see the truth. Truth is a quality of the mind that doesn't depend on figuring things out or being clever. It depends on having integrity in your actions and in your powers of observation, accepting the truth as it is. It means accepting the fact that you play a role in shaping that truth, so you have to be responsible. You have to be sensitive both to what you're doing and to the results you get, so that you can learn to be more and more skillful.

Many people think that self-acceptance means celebrating what's there already: that you're good enough, that you don't have to make any changes. That's not the case at all. Acceptance means accepting the fact that you're responsible for a lot of your experience right now. You can't blame anybody else. And ultimately that's a good thing. If other people were ultimately responsible

for shaping your experience, what could you do? You'd have to go around pleasing them all the time. But the key fact is that you're shaping your pleasures and pains here in the present moment. Some of your experience comes from past actions, but a lot comes from the way you shape things with each present intention.

So learn to be open and honest about the role you're playing in this moment. That way the meditation leads to greater and greater sensitivity into precisely this – what you're doing right now – and into the fact that if you were really observant you'd be a lot more sensitive in shaping your experience. There'd be a lot less suffering. In fact, you could ultimately get to the point where you put no suffering into your experience at all. That's how far the skill can go. It requires that you be true in your observation, both admitting what you're doing to yourself and admitting the results that come, at the same time using your ingenuity to figure out how to do things better.

So this is where those qualities of sensitivity or tenderness on the one hand, and strength on the other hand, come together. The sensitivity lies in allowing yourself to see really refined things; the strength, in admitting the truth for what it is. It's in this area that the ignorance leading to suffering lies: in our inability to be true to ourselves. But, as the old man's statement implied, if you're true, the truth isn't threatening. If you learn to be a real person then reality doesn't hold any dangers, doesn't hold any fears.

If you're still living in worlds that are false and made up, though, then reality poses a threat. Only when you strip away all the unreality in your mind will you find in what's left that there's nothing to fear. There are no dangers. There's just reality meeting with reality, truth meeting with truth.

So the clearer and more honest you are about what you're doing right here, right now, the closer you get to that position where there's nothing to threaten you, where there are no dangers in life, no suffering. That's where this simple exercise of watching your breath, adjusting your breath, and watching it again can take you, if you really follow it all the way through.