

## *Skill*

*May 10, 2006*

Focus on your breathing, wherever you feel the breathing—in other words, wherever there are sensations in the body that let you know that now the breath is coming in, now the breath is going out. Focus on those sensations. It could be a sensation of the air coming in and out the nostrils, or the movement of the shoulders, the movement of the chest, the diaphragm, anywhere in the body at all. Notice when those sensations are comfortable and when they're not. If they're comfortable, keep them going. If they're not, you can change them.

This is where the element of skill comes into the practice. If you've ever developed a skill of any kind, whether it was cooking or carpentry or any physical or mental skill, think of what's involved. One, you've got pre-existing conditions, in other words, things as they are, the raw materials you're working with. Then there's what you're doing with them, and your ability to notice results of what you're doing with them. So here you've got the breath. That's your raw material. Sometimes it's comfortable, sometimes it's not, but you can do things with it. Then learn to read the results.

It's a process of trial and error. Sometimes you get into your head the idea that really long breathing would have to be good, and you just stick with the really long breathing, and you don't notice the results that you're getting until it's obviously not working. So the next time around, try to be more sensitive. Keep this up, and eventually staying with the breath will become a skill.

Always keep this point in mind. All the Buddha's teachings are centered on this issue of skillfulness and unskillfulness. There is a sutta where Ven. Sariputta says that right view starts with this question of what's skillful and what's unskillful, and what in the mind causes skillful behavior, and what in the mind causes unskillful behavior. Then, as he further explains right view, you discover that a lot of teachings come out from that one point.

So this is the amount of right view you need to know right now. When the Buddha said the path starts with right view, for some of us that's intimidating, because there are lots of books on some very abstruse aspects of right view. Dependent co-arising, all the ins and outs of the Buddha's teachings, are essentially questions of right view. But keep in mind that it all comes down to this issue of what's skillful and what's not.

When you approach the meditation as a skill, you start getting results. Always keep in mind that with every moment you're not just watching things passively,

you're actually *doing* something to shape the moment. This is true whether you're conscious of it or not, whether you're meditating or not. This is the way the mind shapes its reality. You've got those raw materials coming in from past karma, and you've got your present intentions along with the results of your present intentions. That's what the present moment is.

As we're meditating, we're learning how to read all that. And to read that, you've got to keep this point in mind: These are your raw materials. You start with the breath, and in order to learn about intention, you very consciously set up an intention in the mind as to what you're going to try to stick with. That way, you begin to see other intentions that were less obvious, things that slip in from underground. It's like putting a dam across a river. Only when you actually try to build the dam do you realize how strong the currents at the base of the river are.

So here you set up a dam to channel your energies. You're going to focus on the breath, and as for any other intention that comes up right now, you don't need it. And one of the skills you have to learn as you meditate is how to ward off those other intentions. They are going to come. Don't get upset when they do, just see it as a challenge.

Again, it's a question of trial and error. You're going to get knocked off course for sure. The question is whether you're just going to get upset about it, or you say, well, that's one mistake, chalk it up to experience, and go back and try again. Your ability to pick yourself up, dust yourself off, and get back with that original intention: That's what's going to make all the difference in developing the skill.

So learn to have a cheerful attitude about what you're doing. Often we're afraid of making mistakes, either because we're used to getting scolded for our mistakes or we're used to having a record kept of all our mistakes. That's what our grades were in grade school, a record of our mistakes that was passed on from grade school to high school. So we get timid about making mistakes. If you're timid in that way, you never learn anything. Have a healthy attitude toward your mistakes. Everybody makes them. The question is how you react to them.

If you can get the "you" out of the mistake and simply look at it as an action that didn't get the results you wanted, then you can go back and try to figure what would be a better way of approaching it. Use your imagination.

For example, if focusing at the breath in the nose doesn't seem right, you can focus at other places as well. If long breathing doesn't feel good, you can try short breathing. You can try deep or shallow, heavy or light, broad or narrow. There are lots of ways of playing with the breath. You can think soft breath or heavy breath, and see what works.

In this way, you're developing right view without really being conscious of it. Everything in the practice is a question of skill or lack of skill. Even your views can either be skillful or unskillful. Your desires can be skillful or unskillful. Your likes and dislikes can be skillful or unskillful. How do you know? By checking to see what their results are. Look at everything in terms of cause and effect.

That's where the question of skill and lack of skill begins to turn into the four noble truths. There are some actions you do that will lead to stress and suffering; other actions will lead to the end of suffering. Those are the basic terms of the four noble truths right there. That's what you keep in mind as you're practicing.

It's called appropriate attention. The Buddha once said that he didn't see any other factor in the mind that was more important for awakening than this factor of appropriate attention, looking at things in terms of skill and lack of skill, cause and effect, starting with something very simple like the breath. As you get more acquainted with the breath, you begin to realize there are skillful ways of breathing, there are skillful ways of thinking about the breathing, skillful ways of visualizing the breath. There are also unskillful ways. It's up to you to figure out which is which.

This is how your insight develops, how your discernment develops. As you get more sensitive to issues of skill and lack of skill around the breath, you begin to see them in the mind as well. There are skillful qualities in the mind, unskillful qualities in the mind. The more you pursue this question, the more you begin to sense which is which. Some ways of thinking, some attitudes, some intentions lead to short-term happiness but then long-term pain. Others lead to long-term happiness even though they may be difficult in the beginning.

That's the real test of your wisdom, not only sensing that, but also once you know it, learning to overcome your likes and dislikes. Even if something you like to do seems pleasant in the beginning, but you know it's going to give long-term pain, how do you talk yourself into not doing it? That's a function of wisdom. Or if something skillful is difficult, how do you talk yourself into doing it when you know that it's going to lead to long-term happiness and pleasure?

The strategic element in all this is a part of wisdom. If your wisdom can't be strategic, then it's pretty useless. You may know a lot of things, but if you can't use them to bring about true happiness, then they're just decorations for the mind, not anything that serves a real purpose.

So as you come to the practice, try to approach everything as a question of skill. Be the sort of person who likes developing skills, and finds it an interesting challenge, because that way of looking at things will take you all away to the goal.

And there *is* a goal. We're not here thinking of the path itself as the goal. This is a path that goes someplace. This is an important part of developing a skill, realizing that there are things that you really want, things that are really worth putting an effort into, and you don't get overwhelmed by how large or far away the goal may seem. Break the task down into small, manageable bits: this breath and then this breath and then this breath. And this thought, this intention. Take them one by one. Look at whatever situation you're in and figure what's the skillful thing to do right now.

The sensitivity and the understanding you develop in approaching things in this way: That's the path. That's the way to the end of suffering. If you can manage to enjoy the process of developing a skill, that attitude will take you to the goal.