

The Mind's Song

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Ajaan Lee used to say that there are two steps to getting started in the meditation. One is to get your body into position: right leg on top of the left leg, or left on top of the right, depending on what you find more comfortable; your back straight; facing forward; your eyes closed; your hands in your lap.

The next step is to get your mind in position. And that's more difficult because the mind doesn't usually want to stay in any one particular position. It's always running around, always quick like a high-strung cat to jump at anything that comes along. Ajaan Mun once talked about "the mind's song." There are rhythms that go through the body, rhythms that seem to go through our awareness. And we start singing along with them without really realizing it, and then we're off wherever the melody will take us. When we put the mind in position, we stop singing along. We just watch what's going on.

So you bring it to the breath. It's a good way to get out of your head and down into the body. Give yourself a good comfortable place to stay and be aware of the breath coming in, aware of the breath going out. Notice how the breathing feels in different parts of the body, because the breathing is a whole-body process. If it's not a whole-body process, that's a sign that there's a blockage someplace you've got to work with.

But first get a good breath rhythm going in any one spot where it's easy to watch. It might be at the nose, the chest, the abdomen, the neck, the middle of the head – any place where all the different pressures of the breath coming in and going out and the pressures of your blood circulation feel right together. Focus right there and allow the breath to find whatever rhythm feels good, feels gratifying. If the mind wanders off, bring it right back. If it wanders off again, bring it back again. You're trying to put it in position – which means finding a good, comfortable posture for the mind – and then trying to get it to *stay* in position. It's the staying that makes all the difference. If you just get into position and then quickly jump away, you don't get the benefits of being in position.

And there are lots of benefits. One, you're giving the mind a place to rest, so that it can recover its strength from all that running around. And, two, when it's in position it can watch, because if you ever want to watch something carefully *you* have to be very still. If you're running around all the time everything is a blur. You snatch a little sight of something here, snatch a sight of something there, but you don't see anything continuously – which means you don't really understand it.

So we're trying to put the mind in a position where it can stay and watch continuously. This position of the observer is a very important part of the meditation – the observer that doesn't go singing along with the different

rhythms or thoughts coming through the mind, but watches them as events. When you're watching things as events, you can decide which things are worth following through with and which ones are not. Of course, you sometimes find yourself slipping off into your old habits of singing along, but you can catch yourself, stop, and come back to the breath, come back to this position of the observer.

Get more and more used to being here. This is where the mind can have a sense of being at home, where it can rest, where it can accurately watch the movements of the mind. Where are they running to? Are they going to a place you want to go? If not, you just drop them, and whatever reality they seemed to have will dissolve away. It's because you give them a reality that they become solid and imposing and gain power over you. But if you learn simply to watch them as events, you can gain the upper hand.

So what you're doing here is developing a place for the mind to rest—a place where, in resting, it heals itself. At the same time, it can watch. And in the watching it learns not to build up new diseases. As any doctor can tell you, there are two parts to maintaining good health. One is taking the medicine when you need it, and the other is having a healthy lifestyle. If you want to be healthy, it's not good to eat unhealthy food, go around smoking, eating junk food, and then coming to the doctor to ask for medicine. The medicine will help, but not nearly as much as when you have a healthy lifestyle where you're not putting the junk into your system to begin with.

And the same holds true for the mind. We come here to meditate to help heal the mind from all the damage it does to itself. We tend to think more of the stress coming in from outside, but actually *we're* playing along with the outside stress, we're singing along with the outside stress, which is why it gets into the mind.

So we come here, close our eyes, sit in a still position, and give the mind a chance to wash out all the unhealthy energies it's picked up. This is a good thing to be doing, but it would be even better if we could maintain this position of the observer all the time. That's a healthy lifestyle for the mind. This is what you want to try to do as the mind gets accustomed to settling down with the breath. Not only when you're sitting here, but also when you get up and start moving around: Try to maintain this same inner position, this same inner posture of being the observer.

And try to notice when you lose it. That's a sign you've run across something important: one of those tricks the mind plays on itself to go someplace it knows it shouldn't. That's one of the reasons for these lapses. The other is that it simply forgets itself and just starts singing along with whatever thought comes along, whatever mood comes along.

These things seem to have so much reality simply because we sing along with them. But if you can maintain the position of the observer, you watch these things as they come, and you begin to see the damage they can do if you take them in. You realize that you have the choice. You don't have to play along with

them, you don't have to sing along with them, you don't have to take them in. You're now in a position of strength, a position where you can watch, where you can see these things simply as events rather than as the worlds to enter into.

In this way you find that the medicine of sitting meditation can seep deeper and deeper, and show more effects than you might have imagined before. Up to now it's simply been a holding action. When things are bad, you sit down; you wash things out of your system, you feel better, and then you go back to your old habits. As a result, the meditation doesn't get a chance to penetrate deeply, to show itself as anything more than simple stress reduction or momentary relief from all the suffering you're carrying around.

But when you can maintain the position of the observer, it becomes a lifestyle, a way of living in which you're not bringing in all those other things to burden the mind to begin with. No matter how the body moves, no matter how thoughts move, you maintain this position. If you can keep this up, then when you come to sit and meditate, you find the meditation goes deeper, deeper, and deeper. You see that it can do more than you might have imagined. It can address the more subtle diseases in the mind, the more subtle harm the mind is doing to itself.

It's like maintaining a yoga position or a stretch. The first couple of seconds are hard because you feel stiff, but then you relax into the stretch. As you relax, you can go further into the stretch because you give it more time, more continuous time, to work its effects.

Meditation is not here simply for coping with the stresses and strains of life. It's for showing how we can ultimately go beyond causing any suffering or stress for ourselves at all – not only for ourselves, but also for the people around us. Ultimately, we learn to drop even the position of the observer to open up to a different dimension in the mind that lies outside of time, outside of space, outside of all the worlds we can create for ourselves.

But to see that you first have to make the observer strong. And to do that you have to give the meditation time, and you have to make it part of a lifestyle, a way of living – an inner posture, an inner position that you maintain – this observer who watches the moods come and go, watches the thoughts come and go, doesn't sing along with them, doesn't cause itself the damage it used to. Over time you find that the posture of the observer goes deeper and deeper. The observer can see more and more because you give it the time to develop, to become strong, to become your real home where you settle down.

So ideally, ultimately, when you meditate, it won't be a matter of getting in position. You'll get the body in position, but the mind will already be in position, the habitual position of the observer. Instead of running out after things, singing along with this tune, singing along with that, you're stepping back a bit. You have a place to step back and simply watch these things. If there's any use to them, you follow through with them. If not, you let them go. This becomes the basic stance of the mind.

As I said, when you reach that point, the meditation shows that it can do a lot more than you might have imagined. It can solve problems you didn't even know you had, eliminate levels of suffering and stress you didn't even know you were causing, because they were always there in the background.

Now that the mind is even more subtle and still, it can see these things. And it's only when you see things that you can let them go.