

The Grass at the Gate

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Ajaan Fuang once said that a lot of the practice is found in the grass at the gate to the cattle pen – the image being that when you open the gate to the cattle pen, the cattle go rushing out looking for grass someplace else. Usually there's a little bit of grass right next to the posts of the gate, but most of the cattle miss it.

It's the same with us. When we look for happiness, we tend to look far away. Even when we're meditating, we tend to look far away from where things actually are. Everything we need to know, the Buddha says, lies in this fathom-long body with awareness.

We sometimes think that Buddhism has a negative take on the body, especially early Buddhism, but it has more of what you'd call a balanced take. Like the chant just now: It isn't lying when it says that the body is filled with all sorts of unclean things – your liver, kidneys, spleen, your intestines, the contents of your intestines. If you took them out and put them on the floor, we'd have to clean up the mess right away. If you put them in nice platters on the table, people would run away in disgust. The only reason we don't go running away from these things is because they're tucked inside right now, so they seem presentable. The purpose of the chant is to give you a sense of detachment from your desire, from your lust, from your attachment to the body as something that constantly has to be pandered to.

Once you have that element of detachment, then you can look at the body and see, "What does it have of a positive nature?" Buddhism talks about that, too. There's a potential for rapture right here, a potential for ease – all associated with the breath. Many times when we read the descriptions of Right Concentration it seems far away, but everything we need is right here.

When Ajaan Lee talks about comfortable breath sensations and uncomfortable ones, we already have comfortable breath sensations in at least *some* parts of the body. There's already the potential for a sense of fullness, a sense of ease in different parts of the body. It's simply a matter of applying our directed thought and evaluation. What that means is that we locate these potentials and then work with them for a while. The "working" here many times is simply a matter of protecting them. The word Ajaan Fuang used is "*prakhawng*," which means you hover around something to make sure that it's okay, that nothing happens to it.

It's like trying to start a fire on a windy day. You have to cup your hands around the little tiny flame you begin with, to make sure that the wind doesn't blow it out, until finally it catches and starts to spread and finally reaches a point when it's strong enough that you don't have to cup it any more. So you might

want to try a little exercise in how to locate that sense of ease in the body and let it develop.

Pay attention to your feet and your hands. Where are they right now? How do they feel? Tense? If they feel tense, relax them. Go through them finger by finger, toe by toe, through the palms of the hands, the backs of the hands, the soles of the feet, the tops of the feet, relaxing all the little spots of tension you find.

You might begin to notice that sometimes, as you breathe in, there's a slight tensing—either in your hands or in your feet, maybe the back of your hands or in your fingers. See if you can breathe in and out without the tensing. Just keep both hands, both feet as relaxed as possible—all the way through the in-breath, all the way through the out-. Notice where in the breath cycle there's a little bit of tensing. Allow it to relax. Get so that you can maintain that sense of relaxation all the way through the in-breath, through the space between the in-breath and the out-breath, all the way through the out-breath, and then through the space between the out-breath and the next in-breath. Keep that sense of relaxation as constant as you can. No matter how the breath is cycling through the rest of the body, keep the sense of relaxation in your feet and your hands as steady as possible.

It doesn't have to be an enormous relaxation, just enough for you to know that it's more relaxed than before. One way of checking it is to compare one hand to the other, one foot to the other. See which one is more tense and then allow it to relax as much as the other one. Sometimes you find that as you relax the feet and the hands, you set off patterns of relaxation through the rest of the body too—up the arms to the neck, up the legs to the small of the back. Allow that to happen, but don't lose your focus on the feet and the hands. Just let that sense of relaxation spread and keep watch over its source.

The focusing on the sensation here is directed thought. Watching over it, protecting it, is evaluation. Staying consistently with the relaxed sensation is singleness of preoccupation. And in that relaxed sensation there's the potential both for ease and for rapture to develop. So you've got the potential for all five factors of the first jhana. They tend to grow stronger if they're allowed to be continuous. There's a cumulative effect.

And that's all you have to do. It's right there. It's very simple, but we tend to make things too difficult for ourselves. We complicate things when we don't really have to. So keep your directed thought and evaluation uncomplicated. Just work on being steadily vigilant right here. And that's it: the grass at the gate to the cattle pen.