

# *Turtle Meditation*

*August 27, 2008*

One of the reasons concentration is so central to the path is that the mind can see things more clearly when it's still. Not only that, it can feel things more clearly as well. As you get more sensitive to the breath, you become more sensitive to the whole range of energy in your body. You can see where you're holding things in, where you're covering things up.

You can also see the impact of your actions. When you're really sensitive inside—if you do something unskillful, say something harsh, or you harm somebody else—you feel it more intensely inside. That old saying that your parents often said when they were hitting you, that “This hurts me more than it hurts you,” and you didn't really believe them: It really does apply to meditators. Sometimes you say something a little bit harsh to someone else and they hardly notice it, but you feel it. It hurts.

We were talking today about some of the basic principles in the path that allow you to be more compassionate, and this is one of them: the fact that, as the mind gets more and more still, you are more and more sensitive to the energies in your body. You sense the repercussions of your words, your deeds, and your thoughts. You see that even a thought, as it appears in the mind, will have an impact on the energy in the body. In fact, when it first appears, it's on the borderline between the two.

When the mind is really still and fills the whole body, you sense little thoughts beginning to form, like little cysts or knots in your energy field. And when a thought first appears, it's hard to say whether it's physical or mental. It's both. Or it has both aspects. And if you're on the lookout for thoughts, if you're wanting thoughts, you can turn that little knot of energy or cyst of energy into a full-blown thought world. Once you get into that little world, you can travel around. Which is why we like these thought worlds. They seem to take us places.

But they keep coming back to the same old place. And the thrill of the ride often disappears very quickly. If a thought was unskillful, if involved greed, anger, delusion, lust, jealousy, fear, or whatever, it will have an impact on the mind. The mind will quiver in a certain way that lets you know that this was unskillful. And the quivering doesn't last just for a few seconds. Sometimes it goes on for a whole day. If you let yourself get involved in unskillful thoughts, spinning out thought worlds of lust or anger, then when the time comes to sit and meditate, you find that the mind is still reverberating.

So the stillness here is a good check on your actions. One of the basic principles is that following the precepts helps your concentration, and your concentration helps strengthen your discernment. But the influences go in the other way as well. The more discernment you bring to your concentration, the stronger it's going to be. The more concentration and discernment you bring to your precepts, the less harmful your actions are going to be. Because the restraint you exercise becomes something that's not just a matter of the precepts. Anything that's unskillful, any intention that would have a harmful effect, you notice. You feel it. And it doesn't feel right.

Ajaan Suwat often commented on how when you get the mind concentrated, it becomes both tough and tender. Tough in the sense that it can withstand all kinds of unpleasant sensory contact. When the body is in pain but the mind is strong, you can be with the pain and not suffer from it. When people are being harsh with you, you can develop an energy field around the body by staying with the breath, letting the breath fill the whole body so that their energy can't penetrate your energy field. When you fully occupy your body in this way, their negative energy goes right past you. You don't suck it in. You don't absorb it. So in that sense, the concentrated mind is tough.

But it's tender in the sense that it becomes very sensitive. And particularly, you become sensitive to your own actions so that your virtue is not simply a matter of the precepts. It becomes a deeper quality of the mind so that even though the things you do may not be against the precepts, but if they're harmful, you know. And that knowing helps refine your restraint.

This is a point Ajaan Lee made in his book *The Craft of the Heart*. And I think he picked it up from Ajaan Mun, because a lot of the Dharma in *The Craft of the Heart* comes from Ajaan Mun. The precepts help concentration and discernment, concentration helps your precepts and your discernment, and your discernment helps your concentration and your precepts. These three aspects of the path help one another along.

This combination of tenderness and toughness: A good image for a meditator is a turtle. The turtle's body is one of the most sensitive bodies in the whole lizard kingdom. So it needs that shell for its protection. In the same way, you want the toughness of concentration to protect you from being weak in the face of adverse conditions, so you don't pick up negative energies, so you don't get knocked off course by unpleasant sights, or sounds, or smells, or tastes or tactile sensations or ideas. That's the toughness you want.

As for the tenderness, it's a tenderness inside, where you're sensitive to the slightest thought, the slightest word, the slightest action. It's possible to meditate and get concentrated and not have this kind of sensitivity because your concentration isn't imbued with discernment. There are people who can get their minds thoroughly concentrated and still be very harmful to others because their concentration is one-sided, narrow, loaded with denial.

But when your concentration is the sort that fills the whole body and it's imbued with discernment—this is the kind of concentration you're developing here as you work with the breath—the more sensitive you get to the slightest variations in the breath, the more sensitive you are to the least little bit of stress that you're causing yourself, the more you're imbuing your concentration with discernment. Then as you spread the breath to fill the whole body, or spread that sense of ease to fill the whole body, the range of your concentration is such that your gaze becomes all around. The text talks of the Buddha as an all-around eye. And what they mean is that his whole body was sensitive. The range of his gaze was 360°. That's the kind of quality you want to develop in your concentration so that it becomes a basis for skillful action in every aspect of life, both inside and out.

As you meditate, you're exercising the four brahmaviharas. Goodwill, in terms of the concentration practice or focusing on the breath, means that you want the breath to be as comfortable as possible. Compassion here means that when you

find that it's uncomfortable, you do what you can to make it more comfortable, make it more pleasant. If it's already pleasant, then you exercise empathetic joy, appreciating the fact that you can do it. You hear of some meditators who feel that they don't deserve the pleasure that comes from meditation. They feel uncomfortable feeling happy. If you find that you have that problem, recognize it as a problem. You're not being realistic, you're being one sided. Learn how to appreciate the fact that yes, you can get the breath to be comfortable, and the body can be filled with a sense of ease and well-being, and that there's no issue of deserving or not deserving this pleasure. It's something that you can learn how to use skillfully, both for your own sake and for that of others, so don't shy away from it.

Then there are areas where you can't make the breath comfortable no matter what: That's when you exercise equanimity. If there are parts of the body that are painful and the breath can't do anything for the pain, you learn how to exercise equanimity there. This way you're getting practice in the brahmaviharas, learning how to develop a goodwill, compassion, empathetic joy and equanimity that are universal, limitless. Then you learn how to apply these different emotions as appropriate.

So as you get more sensitive inside, it puts you in a better position to be more sensitive to what you're doing outside, more sensitive to what the appropriate approaches might be. In this way the practice of meditation is not selfish. The idea that it's selfish is based on the idea that your well-being has to conflict with the well-being of others, that you have to choose one or the other. The Buddha's insight was that if you look for genuine well-being, you find that it doesn't conflict with anybody else's well-being. It actually fosters theirs. One common image is of candles. Each person is holding a candle. You have a lit candle. The fact that yours is lit means that you can help light other people's candles. Your flame is not diminished. And over time, as more candles get lit, they bring more and more brightness for everyone.