

## *Seeing the Stillness*

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When we hear that snakes only see motion, it seems strange to us. We of course think that we see *things*. All they detect is *motion*. You can test this out in the orchard. If you sit perfectly still and a snake comes by, the snake won't see you. It'll go right past you as if you weren't there. It'll detect you only if you move.

We think that's bizarre. But if you stop to look at the way the mind operates, you'll see that it's pretty much like the way the snake sees. We notice change. That's what we look for. That's what we're constantly noticing. When someone tells us the deathless is right here in the mind, we can't see it because all we can see is change. This thing changes, those things change. If nothing else changes, our mind is changing. It's looking here, looking there, and the change is what we follow. And as a result, what we see is stress. We build our sense of ourselves out of what's changing and stressful, but the Buddha says that it just doesn't work. There's no way we're going to find happiness that way if the "we" we create is based on stress. We have to change the way we look.

He insists that we start with the precepts. Remember that: The precepts are meant to change the way we perceive things. We start by acting in new ways. The word for the precepts, for virtue—*sila*—also means something that's normal. We try to create a sense of normalcy in the mind. The mind's normal state is when it's not deciding to kill or steal or have illicit sex or lie or take intoxicants. But it's a state of mind we tend to overlook.

The Buddha tells us to bring the mind to normalcy first by bringing our words and deeds to normalcy. When that state of normalcy grows more consistent, it grows stronger, to where you can actually notice it. Then you begin to think back to the days when you weren't observing the precepts. You realize the sense of dis-ease—out of balance, out of equilibrium—you had. When you compare that with the sense of normalcy you're now beginning to detect, you see there's been a genuine improvement. And as the normalcy is allowed to be more pervasive, it fills more of your life.

The same principle works as you're practicing concentration. You sit here with a body; you notice that there's a pain here and a pain there. The mind tends to connect the pains in the same way we play Connect-the Dots, and that can cause you to create bands of tension all over your body. But instead of focusing on the bands of tension, look at the broader sense of ease surrounding them. It's

like looking at the blank spaces on a map. We tend to look at the roads and the cities and the words, but the blank spaces serve a function, too. Otherwise the placement of the roads and cities wouldn't bear any relation to the actual lay of the land.

So allow the breath to be in a state of normalcy. Think back to when you've been in a good mood: nothing really exciting, but just a basic okay sense of wellbeing. What was your breath like then? What was the visceral feel of that mood? You can try to tune back into that feeling; it's there. Tune back in to the way the breath felt at that point and allow it to have that same sense of ease. Then notice where the other areas of ease are, here and there in the body, that you tend to overlook. Where are they? Can you connect them to the sense of ease you've developed around the breathing? Try to keep them connected, both in space and in time.

In other words, allow the different parts of the body that feel at ease to connect right here in the present moment and then maintain that sense of connected wellbeing, based on the breath, as continuously as you can. At first it may not seem like anything special. But if you allow it to stay connected, if you don't interfere with it and don't jump away from it, you'll find that it grows stronger and stronger. You develop a real sense of fullness. You just sit here breathing in and out, and there's nothing else you need to do to feel content, nothing else the mind would want, simply because you've learned how to change the way you look at things.

Then the skill lies in *maintaining* that state: keeping the sense of awareness, keeping the sense of wellbeing filling the body as much as possible, and then maintaining contact with that state, allowing it to grow, allowing it to develop. Don't jump away from it, thinking, "Well, this can take care of itself. I wonder what *that's* like over there. I wonder what *this* is like over here." This is not yet the time to follow those thoughts, for the sense of wellbeing can't take care of itself. This is the time to develop your ability to stay centered in wellbeing and allow it to fill the body. It's like having a kid. After it's been born, you can't say, "Well, that was interesting. Now I want to go off and star in a play." You've got to commit yourself to looking after the kid until it grows old enough and mature enough to stand on its own two feet.

It's the same with these fragile states of concentration and comfort in the present moment. You've got to keep tending to the various comfortable sensations in the body. Keep them connected. And — as with the child — they'll do a lot of the growing on their own. Your duty is simply to tend to them to allow them to grow. As they stay connected, they strengthen one another without your having to push or pull them, without your having to anticipate anything. Give them the time and the space to do what they have to do.

Once that sense of wellbeing is really solid, *then* you can go back and examine the mind's tendency to look at what's inconstant, what's stressful, what's not self. This time around, though, you're looking at the question from a different perspective. In the past you used to jump from one thing to another, looking for something to settle on for a while, looking for something that would give you wellbeing, and constantly being thwarted. So you jumped again and jumped again, looking for happiness in things that have to change.

This time, however, you look at the mind's tendency to jump in and of itself. Instead of focusing on the things you jump at, just look at the mind's tendency to jump at this, jump at that, to see what's happening. Try to comprehend the mind's tendency to look for things that are inconstant and stressful. When the Buddha taught the first noble truth, he said to *comprehend* suffering. That's why we need to have this sense of wellbeing first, before we can look at stress and suffering for the purpose of comprehending it. If we don't have a sense of wellbeing, then when we see suffering we'll want to get rid of it or jump away from it. But if you've developed a deep, abiding sense of ease, you're in a position where you're willing just to watch the suffering without feeling threatened by it. That way you can comprehend it.

In what ways does the mind move that create stress? Look for them. Then you begin to see that the problem is not with the things you were jumping at but with the way the mind jumps, the way it looks for things, its clinging, its cravings. When you shift your focus from the things to the jumping, you can see that tendency more and more clearly. You can detect it more quickly, to the very beginning points where the mind is beginning to stir, getting ready to jump, getting ready to flow out. That's what the word *asava* means: the tendency of the mind to flow at this thing, flow at that thing. When you begin to see why this happens, you can cut it off.

At first you can do this with blatant instances, and then you get more and more subtle. When you've taken care of the blatant outflows, then you can turn around and take apart the tendency to flow around the sense of wellbeing you created here through your concentration. When you can take that apart, that's when there's real release. In the meantime, though, you want to maintain that sense of wellbeing, keep it going, because that's the point from which you're doing all the work that ultimately will take you to the point where the only thing standing in the way of release is the "you" identified with the concentration.

Our problem is that we approach the Dhamma using our habitual tendency to jump. We want to jump to the ultimate right away. When you get into a Dhamma conversation, within four or five words you're already talking about the absolute, talking about the uncompounded or whatever. People don't like the work that goes in-between. Everyone wants to hear the easy way to overcome

laziness or the quick way to overcome impatience, but that doesn't work. Laziness is overcome by making an effort. Impatience is overcome by sticking with things for a long time. Yet the results are more than worth it. That's the guarantee of the practice.

So meditation does involve work, it does involve patience—it takes time, it takes skill, it takes precision—but the Buddha teaches us to develop these qualities on the solid foundation of wellbeing that you can develop by the way you relate to the breath, by the way you relate to the easeful sensations in the body, the places where the energy does flow properly. Focus on those first and then you can work with the places where the energy doesn't flow properly. But always try to work from a position of strength, from a position of normalcy. That way you'll find that that normalcy grows stronger, more and more pervasive, more and more satisfying.

We're on a path, but it's not a path that saves all its good things for the end. There are a lot of good things that come along the way if you learn to look in the right places and make the best use of the good things you've got.

This is the teaching that Ajaan Lee stresses over and over again. We've got the five khandas. Everybody knows the five khandas are stressful, inconstant, and not-self. But he says, "Don't be in too great a hurry to throw them away. Learn how you can use them." After all, what is the path made out of if not feelings and perceptions and thought-constructs and consciousness? Learn how to use these things. What is rupa jhana made out of? It's based on form, the first khandha, and includes the other four khandhas as well. Learn how to use these things in a way that turns your objects of delusion and suffering into the path. Once the path has done its job, then you let it go.

But first you have to learn where to hold onto. You can't let go of everything all at once. You let go in stages until the path's work is completed. *Then* you let go. That way you let go without hurting yourself. It's like climbing a ladder: If you let go halfway up, you just fall down to the ground. If you climb the ladder to the roof, then when you've reached the roof you can let of the ladder because you're standing on something safe and secure.

So it all comes down to discernment, seeing what really should be let go, what order things are let go in, and what you have to depend on in the meantime. Once those distinctions are clear, then the path falls into place.