

Dwelling in Emptiness

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Ajaan Suwat once said that, as a rule of thumb in your meditation, you can recognize happiness as the stillness, and suffering as the areas that are still disturbed. If you want to see the first noble truth, if you want to see the three characteristics, look at where there's disturbance. In fact, one of the Buddha's main teachings on emptiness is precisely this point. We tend to think of emptiness as being a very abstract, metaphysical principle: the lack of any self, the lack of any self-nature, even in things.

But when the Buddha introduced the topic of emptiness, describing what it means to dwell in a dwelling of emptiness, he said that it's a state of mind where you see simply where there are disturbances and where there are not. You don't add anything to what's already there, and you don't take anything away. In other words, you don't deny the disturbance, but you don't create extra disturbance around what's there. Basically this is a teaching on being more and more sensitive to the pleasure of stillness, as well as to what subtle things may still be disturbing your stillness of mind.

As we're working on bringing the mind to stillness, it's pretty obvious when you're struggling with it, that the inability to get the mind to settle down is suffering. Once the mind does get settled down, there's going to be a sense of ease. But that phase of being unable to get the mind to settle down: It's good to understand that. Ajaan Fuang once noted that a lot of people, if concentration comes too easily, don't understand it. Then on the days when it doesn't come easily, they're really up the creek. What in the past was easy, all of a sudden is hard, and they don't have any handle on the situation. The people who have some difficulty getting the mind to settle down, however, are the ones who, once they overcome that difficulty, know what they're doing. Difficult situations come up, and you have a sense that you know how to handle them, because you've been through that sort of thing before. You understand the mind because you've had to work with it, seeing what gets results and what doesn't get results.

So, if you're having trouble getting the mind to settle down, don't despair. Realize that this is part of the path, understanding why it's hard to settle down. The way to explore that is to try different approaches. Sometimes this means changing the object of your meditation. Sometimes it means changing your focus. If your mind is not ready to settle down with the breath, what things do you have to think about first to get it in the proper mood where it's willing to settle down?

These are all parts of exploring stress, learning about that first noble truth. So even when the mind is not settling down, treat that inability to settle down with respect. Watch it. You're not just going to sit there and accept it. Respect means carefully looking at what's going on, realizing that you can learn from it.

As the mind does settle down, then respect becomes a question of trying to gain more and more sensitivity. You move into a level of stillness. When you first get there, it seems like a huge release from where you've been. There seems to be no sense of stress or burdensomeness there at all. But when you stay there long enough, you begin to realize that there is some stress—if you're sensitive enough, if you look for where that element of disturbance is.

But don't be too quick to do that. If you're just beginning to settle in to a level of concentration, do your best just to stay right there.

They talk about the foolish cow in one meadow on a hillside who sees another meadow over on a hillside on the other side of a ravine. It wonders: "What is the grass like over there? What is the water like over there? Let's go see." Because she's foolish and inexperienced, she walks down the ravine, she gets all tangled up in the rocks and gullies so that she can't get over to the other hillside and she can't get back to where she was before. This stands for a person who's too eager to keep jumping through one level of concentration to the next, to the next, to the next, when you really haven't yet gotten to explore and know the level you're on.

But once you have explored, then the teaching on emptiness basically asks you to look to see: Where is there disturbance in your concentration, and where is there not? What things have you let go of when you're in a particular state? What things are you still holding on to? Holding on to a particular perception will have an element of disturbance.

So this is what the teaching on emptiness is about: looking very clearly at where the disturbance is in your mind, and realize that there's a noble truth buried in there. But you also need the lack of disturbance to give you the steadiness and stillness to create the background against which you can see the disturbance more and more clearly.

It's like going into a house where the refrigerator is running. There may be other noises going on at the same time, but you can't hear them because the hum of the refrigerator disguises them. But once the refrigerator suddenly stops humming, you hear other things: the drops of the water from the faucet, a leak in the toilet. In other words, the lack of disturbance is what allows the very subtle disturbances to suddenly stand out.

So this is one of the reasons why we're working on concentration: to create that background of stillness against which the very subtle movements of the mind,

those barely conscious intentions, create stress, create suffering based on ignorance. As we create less and less disturbance in the mind, we clear away the background so that ignorance has fewer places to hide. So, both the disturbance and the lack of disturbance, the lack of quietude and the ability to create a sense of quietude in the mind: These are where you want to do your exploration. These are where you want to keep digging around, because it's in these these areas that buried treasure lies. Just keep it simple.

You read the history of Buddhism, and the history of emptiness is very, very complex. The history gets in the way. The Buddha, on the other hand, kept it simple: Where is there disturbance? Where is there no disturbance? The ability to admit what is there and not add anything that is not there: That's what it means to dwell in emptiness. As you develop this awareness, this emptiness-dwelling gets more and more refined.

So, as you practice, always try to keep it simple: What is there, what is not there? Where is the disturbance, where is the lack quietude, where is the stress? Where, when you're trying to make things really, really still, is there change? That's what you've got to learn how to comprehend—meaning, that's what you have to learn how to untangle so that you can let it go—because there are all kinds of attachments hidden in there. The comprehension means that you see them for what they are and you can let them go.

The simpler and more basic you keep these things, the simpler it is to see.