

## *Head & Heart*

*January 31, 2007*

The most decisive factor in your practice is the honesty you bring to each breath, each moment you make a decision. The question often comes up, "Is it impossible, say in a lay person's life, to go far in the practice?" We know the monk's life has a lot of advantages, but the fact that a person is a monk or a lay person is not the decisive factor. The decisive factor is how much honesty you bring to the practice each time you make a decision when some issue comes up in the mind. Otherwise, opportunities for developing skillful habits get lost, and opportunities for stopping unskillful ones get wasted.

We're working on a skill here, and it's important to remember each time you reinforce the skill that you're that much closer to awakening. Each time you give in to an unskillful impulse, you're that much further away. So keep emphasizing the importance of the decisions you're making right now, right now. The skills here are the skills of a warrior. Sometimes the Buddha would illustrate the skills in meditation with the skills, say, of a musician or a cook, someone in a relatively peaceful place, but other times he would make comparisons with the skills of warriors, the skills you have to develop in battle, where there are definite dangers. You're facing enemies: How do you skillfully sidestep them? How do you skillfully defeat them?

Part of it lies in recognizing which thought patterns in the mind are unskillful, which ones really are your enemies, in the sense that they work toward your long-term suffering, your long-term harm. The problem is that they speak with your voice. It sounds like you in your brain, saying, "How about this? How about that? Doesn't matter. Just one more."

That's an important argument you've got to learn how to counter: that just one more time doesn't matter. It applies also when the unskillful voices are trying to deride your determination to at least make one skillful decision. They keep saying, "Well, you can go ahead and try to thwart us, but if you meet us down the line, you're going to give in to us, so why not give in to us now?" Your response should be, "I don't know if I'm even going to be here in a couple of minutes. I'd like to die in the midst of a skillful decision rather than an unskillful one." Each effort to do something skillful does count, just as each surrender to an unskillful decision counts as well.

So treat each moment is important. And don't let the belittling voices of your unskillful mind states get you down. Don't let them thwart you. Don't let them

discourage you. After all, this is all we have: our decisions made moment by moment. The more consistently you can stick with the skillful ones, the better. The more quickly you can thwart an unskillful mind state when it's on a roll, the better. Even if you can't totally block it, the fact that you try to fight it is important. If you just give in, as Ajaan Maha Boowa used to say, how can you say that you lose if you're not even fighting? Losing is better than not fighting it all. At least you put up an effort, and maybe a scrap of insight will come from that particular effort.

Over time, these little scraps can build up. You begin to see patterns. You begin to see around a lot of the subterfuges that your unskillful mind states have used in order to maintain control over the mind. And you can begin to affect a revolution. You can overthrow them.

The most important thing is that you don't identify with them. Just because a thought happens to come into your mind doesn't mean that it's *your* thought. You don't have to lay claim to it. You don't have to believe it.

This is one of the most important lessons you need in gaining powers of concentration. You've made up your mind you're going to stay with the breath, stay with whatever your meditation object is, and you've got to maintain that intention, stick with that intention. So the rule while you're meditating is that anything else that comes up is inappropriate, out of place. And of course other voices will come in, other intentions will come in. You simply have to regard them not as your ideas but simply as distractions.

An effective way of not getting distracted is simply not to identify with them. It's like other people speaking outside while you're meditating. You don't have to identify with what they're saying. You don't have to take it in. You're not responsible for it. And when you learn to ignore them, to pay them no attention, it's like a bullet that seemed to be aimed at your heart but suddenly just falls on to the ground.

So there are times when it's effective to see this practice as a kind of battlefield, with skillful and unskillful desires battling it out, and you've got to learn the skills of a warrior. Remember that warriors know how to choose their battles—when you're in a position to choose them. Sometimes they get forced on you, and you have to fight no matter what. But if you're in a position to choose your battles, choose the ones that you know you have at least some chance of winning, to give you a sense of confidence. And also choose the ones where winning out does make a difference.

It's also wise to have a place to back off when you find that you can't battle whatever the issue is. This is why developing powers of concentration is so important. It gives you a place to retreat to. When an issue really seems to be

screaming in your ears, you know it's not skillful, and you can't see a way out of it, say, "I'm just not going to go there at all. I'm not going to get involved." If the issue is stubborn, you can be stubborn too. Go back to your breath, stay with the physicality of your present moment, because you know that if you start getting into the word battles, you're going to lose. So hunker down, and realize that the tension over particular issue is often going to get reflected in the breath, so at the very least you can work with the breath.

This is an important point. In dependent co-arising, the breath comes right after ignorance. This is the kind of breathing that leads to suffering, it's one of the forms of fabrication—bodily fabrication—and it's one of the basic building blocks of all your emotions. There's bodily fabrication; verbal fabrication, which is directed thought and evaluation, the conversations you have inside; and then there are mental fabrications, your feelings and perceptions. Those are the building blocks of your emotions, the building blocks from which your desires are formed.

So if you see an unskillful desire coming in and it seems to be taking control, you can get back down to the breath, work through whatever tension, whatever tightness may be surrounding that desire, and that helps to weaken it.

You're also working on different perceptions. Instead of seeing the tension as a power that comes along with the desire, as proof of the desire's insistence, you begin to see it as something you can change. You work at it, not by arguing with the desire, but by changing the energy configuration of the body.

This is why that factor of mental fabrication is so important: your feelings and your perceptions. When you practice breath meditation, you're learning ways of dealing with perceptions, ways of dealing with feelings, to breathe in a way that gives rise to ease, fullness, rapture. Learn to perceive the breath as a whole-body process. How do you perceive the breath energy in the body in such a way that you can calm down the movements of the in-and-out breath?

Start by perceiving the breath as energy filling the whole body. When you read up on the ways that Ajaan Lee describes the different levels of breath energy, they can change your perception of what breath is, what breath can be, what kind of breath you can tune in to. That, too, can help undercut an unskillful emotion, help provide a foundation for skillful ones. As you breathe in ways that give rise to more ease, you perceive the breath as the shadow side of the conversation going on in your mind. But, paradoxically, as you change the shadows, that's going to change the conversation.

In other words, you try to bring knowledge to processes that are normally done in ignorance. You try to bring your head and your heart together. The

Buddha never made a clear distinction between head and heart. The Pali word *citta* covers both sides of the mind, the emotional and the intellectual. This is what we're doing: We're training both the head and the heart through the breath.

The head is the part that can figure out causality, figure out inter-relationships, so that your emotions turn from emotions that are harmful into ones that are skillful. We all want happiness: That's the basic movement of the heart, and what we're doing as we meditate is to teach the head respect for that desire for happiness, realizing that this is the big issue in life, the question of happiness, the question of suffering. This helps keep your mind from wandering off and speculating about other things that are not related to that issue.

At the same time, your heart needs to learn respect for cause and effect, what's going to work in bringing about happiness. The untrained heart wants things right now, right now, right now, and the head has to know, no, the causes have to be put in place.

So just as the head is taught respect for the issue of happiness and suffering, your heart has to learn respect for experience and causality. When the two of them work together, when they both have this proper kind of respect, then you start getting results.

When they're working as allies like this, then the fight against unskillful emotions, unskillful thoughts, impulses, desires, gets a lot easier. This is another important warrior skill: learning who your allies are, learning how to bind them together, make them loyal to one another.

So it's important, on the one hand, that you take the time to gain an intellectual understanding of what you're doing, because it can help educate this battle between what's skillful and unskillful, your skillful habits, your unskillful habits, learning to recognize which is which, what they're made of, so that you can take apart the building blocks of unskillful habits and reassemble them as skillful ones. When both the head and heart are working together, then the battle gets a lot easier. The question of learning how to be honest gets a lot easier as well. When the head and the heart are on the same page, there's less of a tendency to lie to yourself. All the issues that come up in the mind get a lot clearer as you bring more understanding to the process of what's really important in life, and of the decisions you're making right now.