

A Magic Set of Tools

August 10, 2004

As you're sitting here, there are a lot of things you could focus on in the present moment. You could focus on the sound of the crickets. You could focus on the sound of the bombing practice off to the west, the temperature of the air—all kinds of things. The question is: Which thing are you going to focus on that's going to deliver the best results for the mind?

This is where the breath comes in. It's something that's here all the time—coming in, going out, staying still—giving us our sense of the body. It's a place where we can settle down, something we can stay in touch with at all times—if we're mindful.

It's important to understand what *mindfulness* is: It's the act of keeping something in mind. The word *sati* is related to the verb *sarati*, which means to remember. You focus your attention on one particular thing and then keep reminding yourself to stay there. This is how concentration is developed. But concentration is not just a question of memory. To be a part of the path, it has to be alert as well. We're not trying to put ourselves into a trance. We simply want to stay focused on an aspect of the present moment that's going to be helpful. Mindfulness is what reminds us to stay at that present sensation or present occurrence; alertness is what allows us to see what's going on.

The third quality we add is persistence or ardency. Keep with it. No matter how loud the bombs or incessant the crickets, you're not going to send your attention after them. You know they're there. You're not going to deny that they're there, but they're simply not places you want to go. You're going to keep tabs on this one thing: the breath coming in, going out. If you prefer a meditation word, you can stay with *buddho*. If you want, you can focus on the parts of the body, like the bones, skin, your liver—anything that keeps you grounded here in the present moment in a way that helps mindfulness and alertness to grow, to develop.

Your ability to stick with these qualities is what's going to help them grow. When you notice yourself wandering off, ardency means that you bring the mind right back. If it wanders off again, bring it back again. You don't give up. You don't get discouraged. While you're with the breath, ardency means that you try to be as sensitive as possible to the sensation of the breathing. The more consistent your sensitivity, the more refined the sense of comfort you'll derive

from the breathing. As Ajaan Lee says, when you're mindful and alert like this, mindfulness and alertness change into the factors of *jhana*, or steady absorption.

We often hear that mindfulness practice and concentration practice are two different things, but the Buddha never taught them that way. He said that right mindfulness leads naturally to right concentration. In all of the descriptions of the path—such as the noble eightfold path, the five faculties, the seven factors for awakening—right mindfulness always precedes right concentration. So don't think of them as separate practices; think of them as qualities of the mind that help each other along. Mindfulness turns into directed thought as it shades into the steadiness of concentration. Once concentration gets more solid, your mindfulness gets a lot steadier. When you reach the fourth *jhana*, the Buddha says, that's where mindfulness becomes pure.

The word *jhana* is related to a verb *jhayati*, which is a homonym for a verb *to burn*—to burn in a steady way, like the flame of this candle at the front of the room. Pali has different verbs for the word *to burn*. There's the burning of an ordinary fire that flickers and flares, but then there's *jhayati*, which describes the burning of an oil lamp—steady, so steady you can read by it. And that's the whole purpose of getting the mind to stay steadily here in the present moment: so that you can read what's going on in the mind.

In the beginning, the steadiness requires some protection, just like the candle here. If the wind outside started to flare up more than it is right now, we'd have to put a glass globe around the candle to keep the flame steady. That glass globe is directed thought and evaluation. Keep reminding yourself to come back—stay with the breath, stay with the breath, stay with the breath—consistently. And then evaluation, which grows out of alertness, looks at the breath: Is this a comfortable place to stay? What do you need to adjust? Do you need to move the focus of your attention? Do you need to adjust the breath? Do you need to adjust some of the concepts in your mind about what you're doing? If the breath is too subtle to follow, can you stay simply with the sense of the body sitting here? There are lots of things to evaluate.

This is where the element of discernment or insight comes into the practice. Again, we often hear that *jhana* practice is a tranquility practice and insight practice is something else, but again, the Buddha didn't divide things up that way. He said that you need tranquility and insight in order to get the mind to become steady like this. The insight lies in understanding what problems you have to face and how you can get around them; the tranquility lies in the element of steadily, calmly watching things.

So you use directed thought and evaluation to protect what you've got. As a sense of ease and fullness develops in the present moment, you've got to protect it even more. Stick with it, work at whatever you need to do to maintain that

sense of wellbeing—learning when you’re trying too hard to make it better, learning when you’re not trying hard enough to notice what can be done to relax things even further, make them even more gratifying and pleasurable. That’s all a function of insight: watching things, evaluating things, figuring out which causes to change to make the effects just right.

This is the element of insight, the element of discernment that we’re working on while we’re on the path. We develop it in simple practices like this: learning what’s just right in terms of the breath. That’s the middleness of our middle way right now. The word *middleness* also applies to the appropriateness of what we’re doing. Sometimes we have to be very protective of what we’re doing when there are lots of external distractions, or when the mind itself seems to be rambunctious and hard to control. We have to make an extra effort during times like that. At other times, the effort doesn’t have to be quite so strong: All you need to do is just watch, keep tabs on things, and they seem to behave on their own. If you mess with them too much, they’re going to rebel, so you have to be very sensitive to what’s needed, what’s going on. This is part of the middleness of the middle way: the appropriateness of what you’re doing. As you develop this sense of appropriateness, this sense of “just right,” you’re developing discernment in the midst of concentration practice. The Buddha said there’s no discernment without jhana, no jhana without discernment. The two qualities help each other along.

So if you find yourself slipping off the breath, slipping off the topic of your meditation, remember these things. When things get balanced, you don’t have to think about them that much. Once you develop a sense of balance, you just maintain that balance in your practice. It’ll be sub-verbal.

It’s like sailing a boat. When you get on the boat for your first sailing lessons and you’re told to steer the boat to the left, sometimes you flip it over because you steer too hard. Or you’re told to steer to the right, and again you flip it over in the other direction because you’re steering too hard. But after a while you begin to get a sense of exactly how much pressure you have to apply to the rudder, and you get so that you hardly even think about it. It becomes an intuitive sense. You’re alert to it—you have to be alert—but you don’t have to verbalize it. This is what we’re working toward in the practice: gaining that intuitive sense of what’s just right for right now—when you have to apply a little bit more pressure, when you have to hold back a little bit—so that you don’t need all these concepts.

As the meditation gets more and more intuitive, as the mind gets more and more firmly settled right here, you can actually drop the directed thought and evaluation and just plow right into the sensation of the breath or whatever your object is. When you get there, you begin to wonder, “Why did you ever think

you had to do anything more in the meditation than just be right here?" That's what it seems like from that perspective. So watch out that you don't get complacent, because you *can* lose this. It's simply a matter of having that intuitive sense of where your spot is and how to stay there. This is how to develop a foundation for the mind: You use mindfulness and alertness, you use your discernment to get the mind concentrated, and then once it's concentrated you use that concentration to discern things even more clearly. All the factors of the path help one another, and they all come together. There's a unity to the path. Even though it has eight folds, it's one piece of paper.

So if these thoughts are helpful when you find yourself drifting off or losing balance, keep them in mind. There will come a point where you don't have to consciously remember them. All you'll have to do is be very watchful, very alert, making sure you're not complacent, and you can drop the concepts. Dropping them doesn't mean you'll forget them. They'll be there to pick up again when you need them, but you don't have to carry them around all the time. They're like a magic set of tools: They float right within reach. You don't have to carry them. Or like your shadow: It goes everywhere you go, but you don't have to carry it with you. It places no weight on you at all.