

In the Mood

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Ajaan Suwat often recommended putting yourself in a good mood each time before you meditate. This may sound a little backwards for many of us because we meditate in order to put ourselves in a good mood, and yet he says to start out with a good mood. But when you stop to think about it, there's really no way you can get good results out of the meditation unless the mind has at least some good qualities in it, some cheerfulness, some patience, some wisdom. These are qualities that act as seeds, that allow the meditation to develop. We're not totally empty-handed when we come to the meditation. We do have good qualities in the mind, and there are plenty of things we can think about to put the mind in a good mood.

This is why we have the chant on goodwill to start out the meditation each and every time. Goodwill is a good thing to think about. You look at yourself spreading thoughts of goodwill and you feel good about yourself. You're not totally selfish, not totally angry, vindictive, whatever. There's at least *some* goodness inside you. You take that as your starting capital. As with any investment, you need to have something to begin with. If you don't have money, at least you've got strength, or you've got your intelligence. You take whatever good things you've got and you invest them. That's how they grow.

So when we sit here to meditate we do our best to make the mind patient, to lift it above its ordinary cares and concerns of the day, and then bring it to the meditation object. That way you can relate to the breath, or whatever your object, in a friendly way.

Being in a good mood puts the breath in good shape as well. If you feel frustrated about your breathing or frustrated about your meditation, that's going to do funny things to your breath, make it harder and harder to stay with the breath. So think in whatever way helps the mind get ready to meditate, in the mood to meditate. This is part of the first basis of success: *chanda*, the desire to meditate. You want to meditate. You feel an inclination, an attraction to the meditation.

If you sit down and you feel yourself totally disinclined to meditate, don't just force yourself to do it. Remind yourself of the good reasons for why you're doing it. Think of ways to make it interesting, ways to make it entertaining. You can do all kinds of things with the breath. Look at Ajaan Lee's Dhamma talks:

When he defines the different levels of breathing in the body, he hardly ever repeats himself. There's always something new, something different that he's found from his meditation. We don't have to memorize all his ways of analyzing the breath. We should give them a try, of course, but we should also look at *our* ways of analyzing the breath energy and see what works for us. When you feel depressed, what kind of breathing feels uplifting and energizing? When you feel manic, what kind of breathing feels grounding? When you feel lazy, what kind of breathing energizes you? When you feel tense, what kind of breathing relaxes you? There's a lot to explore, and in the exploration you get absorbed in the breath without even thinking about forcing yourself or holding a whip over the mind.

This way the mind can be on good terms with the breath, the breath can be good, and it's easier and easier to settle down. So always take stock of your mind before you meditate, to see what kind of shape it's in.

Don't let thoughts of frustration or discouragement take charge of the mind. The Dalai Lama once said the thing he found most surprising about Westerners was their self-hatred. In Tibet, he said, only the village idiots feel self-hatred. Of course, he said that smiling, but it's a pretty harsh judgment. And it's also true, I noticed, in Thailand. Perhaps not so much any more: As modern culture moves in, it really does teach people to hate themselves, to feel bad about themselves. It holds up all sorts of images of physical and financial perfection that nobody can live up to. But in traditional culture, one of the basic skills of being a human being was, essentially, how to feel good about yourself, how to love yourself, how to wish yourself well, and how to act intelligently on that wish. Only really stupid people would hate themselves, and yet that kind of stupidity is rampant now in the modern world. Be careful not to pick it up.

The mind has the potential for all kinds of moods. Sometimes simply sitting and taking stock of things for a few minutes, learning how to use our powers of thought—not to destroy ourselves as many of us do, but as an assistance to the meditation—can make all the difference. We often think that to meditate is to stop thinking. Well, you have to learn how to think properly before your thoughts can stop in a skillful way.

If you're thinking in ways that are self-destructive, in ways that are really harmful to yourself, and you simply stop, it's like running a truck into a wall. You can get thrown through the windshield or suffer whiplash. But if you learn how to think in ways that are for your own true benefit—like the things we chant about every evening, which are always beneficial to think about—then when the time comes for the mind to settle down and think less and less and less and get more and more absorbed in the present moment, it's a lot easier. There's a natural deceleration.

So the way you prepare yourself to meditate, the attitudes you bring to the meditation, are very important. This doesn't mean that you should meditate only when you're in a good mood. If you're in a bad mood, think in ways that will improve your mood, that will improve your attitude toward the meditation, your attitude toward the object that you're going to be focusing on. Remind yourself that the breath is your friend, and you're here to develop the friendship even further. In that way your thinking, instead of being a distraction, is actually a component part of the meditation. It's an important step that can't be overlooked.