

Gather 'Round the Breath

August 10, 2011

So here you are. At least part of you is here. And what you want to do is bring all of you here, all of your thoughts, all of your feelings, perceptions. Concentrate right around here. Ajaan Lee talks about two types of aggregates. There are those that basically head outside, interested in forms outside, feelings and perceptions of those forms, thoughts about those forms, and your awareness of those forms. Then there are those that hover around your mind.

So focus on the second kind. There are feelings right here hovering around your sense of awareness, perceptions that hold you here. The breath is very close, so focus on the breath first. Eventually you'll be getting right at the sense of awareness itself. And you have a perception that hovers around that, and the fabrications, the thoughts that protect that awareness, that try to keep it separate from other things. Even when you're aware of other things, there's a sense of separate awareness.

For the time being, focus on the breath, because, of the different properties of the body, it's the one closest to your awareness. It's what keeps the body and mind together. It's your glue. And it can be a very subtle glue because there are many levels of the breath. There's the obvious breath coming in and out, and then there are subtler breath energies that move through the body at different speeds. There's a kind of gentle massage that goes through the body as you breathe in, breathe out, and then there's a quicker movement of breath energy that goes through the body immediately. As soon as you start breathing in, it's already gone through the whole body. Then there's the breath energy that's very still. You can contact it at different spots in the body. Ajaan Lee talks of contacting it at the diaphragm. Other people find other spots where there's a sense of stillness in the midst of the movement of the in and out breath.

So try to bring all of your thoughts and awareness here. Gather everything here. This is one of the terms they often use in Thailand: to bring your mind together, to gather it together, *ruam cai*, so that the little wandering parts that would go out and want to listen to the crickets, or think about where you've been today, or where you're planning to go tomorrow, or whatever: You can just cut those short. Head them back right here. Keep everything circling around right here: your awareness of the breath, your awareness of the mind together with the breath. You want your mindfulness to think about the breath, and to think about

the mind, and your alertness to pay attention to both: How are things going with the breath? And to what extent is the mind staying with the breath?

In the beginning, you have to go back and forth between those two things until everything gathers together into one. Try to keep everything circling around right here. If there's some centrifugal force that's going to send something spinning out, just think of it coming right back, like a comet that goes way out to the fringes of the solar system but then comes back in toward the Sun again. Don't let anything head out and then just go away. Keep coming back, coming back, coming back, because you learn a lot about the mind as you keep directing it back. There will be those thoughts that want to head out someplace else, and you have to learn how to stop them.

And what's the best way to stop them? If you just clamp down on them, sometimes they'll sneak out in another direction. So you've got to learn how to unravel them. The first rule you have to make for yourself is that when you catch yourself in a thought wandering way, you don't have to finish the thought first before you come back. It may be a really good thought, and it would be nice to sort of tie things up with a nice sense of closure, but you say: nope, nope, nope. You come right back. Because if you try to finish the thoughts first, you're giving priority to the thought. Thoughts have their internal rules, their internal logic, and if you get stuck into those rules and that logic, it's going to be easy to slip off again the next time. So just leave things with frayed edges, frayed ends, and come back, come back, come back, gather in again.

As you keep at this, there will be a sense that your awareness settles in, and then you try and maintain that, watch over it. Again, your mindfulness and alertness have to be active all the time as you're doing this. The mindfulness keeps reminding you: This is where you want to stay. And then you're on the lookout to watch out for any thoughts that want to pull away, the ones that say: Enough of that, what's next? Well, it's *not* enough yet. If it really were enough, you'd have no more defilements, and that would be the end of the problem. You haven't reached that stage yet. You need more concentration. So any thoughts that complain about this, you have to recognize them for what they are—disturbances—and you can't identify with them.

What you're doing here is that you're shifting the balance of power inside, and giving more priority to this stillness. In the past, the priority was given to thought fabrication, and all the PR work that thought fabrication does about itself, about how wonderful and useful it is, and how much you learn, and how much you get entertainment this way, and all the other voices in the mind that cheer you on in that direction. But now you're saying: No, the mind needs a place to settle in; it

needs a place to rest. If it's going to gain any strength, if it's going to understand itself at all, it's got to be willing to stay here for a while. So give it a place where it can settle in and feel nice and snug.

And notice where the breath energy feels good inside the body, where there's a sense of fullness that you can maintain even as you're breathing out. It's not like you're filling up when you breathe in and then squeezing things out when you breathe out. You want to maintain the fullness even as the breath energy goes out. You don't have to push anything out or squeeze anything out. What has to go out will go out. You don't have to expel it. Then you find that, over time, it's as if you're charging your battery. The energy builds, builds, builds, but it builds in a quiet and nourishing way, not in a tense and overstuffed way. That's the quality you're looking for.

So be careful not to let the metaphors and ideas that come from the words get in the way of having a sense of what really does feel good to settle in with, and what you can stay with for a long period of time. When we get the mind to settle down, it's not like we're clamping down on it. And when we talk about the mind being wide open and free, that doesn't mean it's just going to wander around the meadow. It's centered, but on the edge there's no sense of clamping down. It's got a solid center but a wide-open periphery.

As for whatever discussion there is in the mind, again, whatever aggregates there are about perception or feeling, have them circle around the meditation to protect it. In the beginning, you will have to think about what you're doing. That's what the directed thought and evaluation are for. And even when those are dropped, there's going to be an element of intention that the circles around the quietness, circles around the stillness to protect it.

So there will be some activity in the mind to begin with, circling around and looking for any cracks in the walls. Like that image the Buddha has of the gatekeeper who walks around the fortress to make sure there are no other ways of entry or exit from the fortress aside from the one main gate: You don't want your thoughts slipping off to the past, you don't want them slipping off to the future, down to the ravine, up to the mountain. You don't want them to go anywhere right now. Just let them circle around right here. Think of them as planets circling around the Sun, or electromagnetic field circling around the earth, protecting it from the Sun's energies.

And, for the time being, the whole rest of the world can go away. Think of that phrase in the formula for establishing mindfulness: putting aside greed and distress with reference to the world. Any thoughts that refer to the world in any way at all, just drop them, drop them, drop them, cut them off and bring them

back in. That way you find the strength that comes when everything does gather together.

An image they like to use in Thailand of thread. If you have individual threads scattered around, they have no strength at all. But if you weave them into a cloth, you can do lots of things with a cloth, and the threads get a lot stronger and a lot harder to rip. So you want to weave everything together here in the mind. All your thoughts and perceptions and feelings: Weave them together around the breath here. Allow the mind some time to be itself, not to take on any outside burdens, and to develop the strength that it can develop only when it's allowed to be still.