

In Shape to Meditate

February 4, 2012

When Ajaan Suwat was here he would often begin his instructions by saying: get your mind in shape to meditate. So what do you do to get it in shape? Think about why you're here. Are you here for the sake of true happiness? And think about where your mind is right now. Is it leaning in the direction of too much energy or too little energy? Is it preoccupied with pleasant things or unpleasant things? Do you have a clear idea of where you've been in your meditation? And where you would like to go? These are all things you want to think about as you get ready to meditate.

That reflection on true happiness serves warning to any thought that doesn't relate to true happiness: It doesn't have any place right here right now. But you may have some issues that are covered with Velcro, very difficult to put aside, in which case you may have to do a little preliminary cutting away, shaving off all those little Velcro hooks. If you have thoughts involved with relationships, remind yourself that no relationship is going to provide you with true happiness. To expect true happiness out of a relationship is to place too much weight on the relationship, more than it can bear. If you're preoccupied with something that's already happened today, remind yourself that you can't go back and change it. No matter how much you rerun it through your mind, it's not going to bring back the past. So let that go.

As for the future it hasn't come yet, you don't really know what's going to happen. But you *do* know that you'll have to be prepared for anything. Qualities like mindfulness, alertness, concentration, discernment: These are all good things to have when the unexpected happens. So rather than plan specific strategies for how you're going to deal with this, deal with that, remind yourself that often you have to think up and adjust your strategies in the line to the situation, and that's best done if you're really alert and can keep the mind really calm.

And that's what you're working on here right now.

If you're feeling a little lazy, think of what's motivating you to meditate, and how you can give a little more oomph to that motivation. What thoughts will help? This is one of the reasons that we chant the recollection of the Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Sangha every evening before we meditate. We bow down to the Buddha because the Buddha represents the things that we want to value within ourselves. We think of his qualities, his compassion, his purity, his discernment: These are good things to have. The fact that there have been people on Earth who

have developed them all the way to the end of suffering: That's something inspiring. That includes both the Buddha and the members of the noble Sangha.

Then there's the Dharma that the Buddha found and taught. It's been passed down from generation to generation because it's a valuable, and here it comes to our generation. We've got the chance to make use of it or just to throw it away. Which would you prefer? That kind of thinking can give rise to more motivation to practice.

You can also think about the dangers of not practicing. Like that chant we had just now: The world is swept away, things change, it offers no shelter, there's suffering, there's nothing of our own in the world that we can really hold onto as any kind of protection. And then that reflection on craving: If we don't take care of our craving, we're just going to keep coming back to more and more and more of the same old changing, stressful world, but it constantly eludes our grasp. Which means we've got to work on the mind.

It's helpful to get the mind in shape like this so that you're more prepared to settle down. And when you have settled down, anything else that comes up you can remember: Okay, we're here to meditate, we're here to develop concentration, we're not here to be thinking about tomorrow's shopping list or going over what someone said today. One of the important skills as a meditator is to learn how to step out of your thoughts, because all too often we jump right in. For many of us every thought that comes is like a little present wrapped up in wrapping paper with the bows: "Oh what's this?" You want to go inside and see what's in there, and it just sucks you right in.

So, for the time being, just let all those little presents stay scattered around. You know what many of them are all about anyhow. It's a pretend game that we play, pretending that we don't know even when we really do. You don't have to play the game. And it's not the case that a thought coming up right now is going to come just this one time. This is not your only chance to deal with that really wonderful thought. It'll come back.

What you need now is another set of skills, the skills of wisdom, compassion, and purity that the Buddha exemplified. Those are the things you want to work on right now. So very few of any of your thoughts are in any way related to those qualities, so the wise thing right now is to learn how to step back, be an adult about your thinking, and realize that you want to work on some qualities of mind rather than specific thoughts.

The qualities here are mindfulness, alertness, those things that undergird the development of discernment. Keep the breath in mind and be alert to it as it comes in, as it goes out. Be alert to how well your mind relates to it, how you can

change the way you breathe. How can you change the way you think about your breathing, so that it's easier to stay with? If you run into pains in the body, how do you work around them?

Sometimes you feel that it's asking a little bit too much to work around the pain. After all, it's invaded your space, what right does it have to be there? But the question always is, well, what right do *you* have to be there? You were the one who latched on. Nobody invited you. And you didn't really look at the fine print. You wanted a human life, well, here it is. So if there's a pain you have to work around, you work around it. Give the mind a space where it can feel at ease.

One of the signs of a true warrior is knowing where your strengths are, where your weaknesses are, and having a willingness to back off when you know you're not ready for a particular battle. In the meantime, you cultivate the qualities that will help when the time comes to go into battle, to really look into the pain, really look into your attachment to the pain, and all of the issues around it.

We mentioned earlier today that the big issue is the way the mind fabricates things, and you get to know how the mind fabricates things by fabricating good things first. We've been fabricating all kinds of ignorant things that lead to stress and suffering, so now let's fabricate something good: a state of concentration in the mind. Make way for the things that you can't change, and work on the things you can. In this way, you get more and more sensitive to the way you shape your experience by the perceptions you hold in mind, by the way you think about things, the questions you ask.

You can ask questions about the breath: Where is it coming in right now? Not the air coming in and out the nose, but where does the feeling of energy come in and out of the body? In how many different directions? Do you have a sense that it's coming in from different directions? When these energies come into the body, are they working together? Or are they working at cross purposes? Look into that. That's something you might want to sort out as you're sitting here so that you can sit with a greater sense of ease and well-being. In other words, you learn how to use your directed thought and evaluation to bring the mind down into a state of stability. Analyze things in a way that leads towards a sense of well-being.

As you get better and better at this process of fabrication, as you're doing it with the more and more knowledge, that cuts through one of the really important links in dependent co-arising right there: from ignorance to fabrication. That's how things get started all the way down to suffering. But if you bring knowledge to the process, that can relieve a lot of suffering.

This is why the Buddha recommends that, when you're working with the breath, you're upfront about the fact that you are shaping things. You are working

with intention. After all, the mind's not just a passive recipient of things. It's constantly going out and looking. This is a mind that's attached to a body that needs to feed, so it's used to looking for food, fixing food, deciding what's good food, and what's not good food. It's driven by feelings of hunger. So it's an active intelligence that we've got here. We're not just sitting here watching things come and go. We're actively shaping our experience to figure out what to feed on, what we can lay claim to to feed on, and where we can look for our next meal. That's the kind of mind we have. That's the kind of mind we're training. So learn how to teach it how to feed on the breath, to find a sense of well-being right here.

As the Buddha says: Some of the best food for the mind is the sense of refreshment, fullness, and rapture that comes from concentration. What ways of breathing are refreshing? What ways of breathing give rise to a sense of fullness and maintain a sense of fullness in the body? All too often, we get full as we breathe in, and then squeeze things out as we breathe out. How do you maintain a sense of fullness as you breathe out, so that all the blood vessels are relaxed, and the blood is flowing everywhere in the body, and there's no need to squeeze anything out? The energy goes out on its own. You maintain the sense of everything being full throughout all the energy channels of the body, and see what that does for the mind. What sense can you gain of fullness, of satisfaction, of being here in the present moment?

As you feed the mind good food like this, then when the thought of other food comes up, you're not all that interested. You've got something really good right here. There may be the force of habit when you go back to old things. But the more you learn how to appreciate the sense of fullness you have right here, the more you can use it to help let go of things that otherwise would just pull you in and make you suffer in the end.

So you're trying to fabricate something really good right here, with a sense of knowledge, as you're observant. In this way, you begin to understand fabrication, and how you do have some say in what you're experiencing right now. We're not totally passive, and also not totally subject to the results of past karma. We have some choices. The more skilled we are, the more we can do with those choices.

It's like being a cook. A really skilled to cook can go into a kitchen with just about anything, and come out with a really good dish to eat. Even if it's just scraps, sometimes you can make good food out of it if you're really skilled. So we have the Buddha as our example that these skills can be developed. Because, he once said, throughout his practice there was never a time when his mind was overcome by pain or overcome by pleasure. And the person he was talking to said, "Maybe that's because you never really experienced any big pleasures or pains." And the

Buddha replied, oh no, lots of pain, but he learned how not to suffer from it. Lots of pleasure, but he learned how not to get carried away. These skills are possible.

So learn how to be good at fixing your meal, because it gives you energy on the path—and also teaches you some very important lessons about the mind, lessons that come in handy in learning how not to suffer, regardless of what the situation is. There's so much in the world that you can't control, it's good to find things that you can—and it's good to learn that the things that you can control, the qualities of your mind, your intentions, are the ones that make all the difference between suffering or not. They're the crucial ones, so give them a lot of attention.