

## *A Rite of Passage*

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One of the things our culture lacks is a serious rite of passage: a time when you can go off, be by yourself, delve down inside. You start sorting out the things you learned as a child on your way to adulthood, trying to see which things you're going to carry into adulthood and which you're going to leave behind.

It's almost as if our culture's afraid to have people do that, for fear what they might see. Our minds are so connected now through the media, and there's a strong sense that if you're not participating in the general culture, there's something wrong with you. We have very little room for dissent, very little room for real independence.

But meditation is one activity that you can do that gives you some of that freedom, gives you some of that time to yourself.

In a lot of cultures, they want you to go out and have a vision quest and gain a vision—maybe of your totem animal or some symbol that the culture recognizes. The Buddha's rite of passage is a lot more radical than that. It calls everything into question. In particular, he came to find an answer to the question that deals very deeply with our relationship to society around us: To what extent does your personal happiness have to make way for the needs of society? To what extent is it really detrimental to society for people to go off and find happiness in their own ways? And to what extent does your personal happiness have to be in conflict with others'?

The Buddha found that it is possible to find a happiness that doesn't harm anybody. The fact that he gained awakening never harmed anybody, even though, when he came back to teach, a lot of his teachings were not pleasing to some people who were not willing to change their ideas. So it's not the case that he came out with an answer that was going to please everybody. But he came up with an answer that didn't harm anyone. And at the same time, it brought him to a happiness that was the ultimate happiness.

So we look at his example and say, "If he can do it, why can't we?" This is what we're doing as we meditate: giving the mind a place where it can set itself apart, not only from people outside—that's called physical seclusion—but also from the people inside our minds. That's called mental seclusion. We have all these different voices in our mind that we've picked up from people: our parents, our teachers, our friends, the media. And it's a real jumble. It's good to have some time

away physically so that you can get off by yourself and then give yourself a place to stay in mind so that you can step out of the thoughts, step out of the voices.

This is one of the reasons why we work with the breath. It's the closest thing to the mind that's not a thought. Among the various elements or properties of the body, the breath is the one most immediately present to your awareness. We tend to think of the body as being a solid lump that we're aware of and then the breath is something we have to pull into the lump. But actually, breath is what lets you know that there's solidity there to begin with. It's right there next to the mind. And it gives you a place where you can stand a little bit outside of the mind, outside of your thoughts, and yet be close enough so that you can watch them. That's part of the Buddha's rite of passage: giving you this place.

So explore your breath. Learn to see which kinds of breathing feel good, which kinds of breathing don't feel good, which ways of picturing the breath to yourself are helpful and which ways are not, how you can breathe in a way that really is blissful. One of the tricks is making sure that you don't squeeze the end of the breath in as you change to the breath out. Try to think of the in-breath flowing into the out-breath, the out-breath flowing back into the in-breath. In other words, let the breath do the breathing. You don't have to use the solid parts of the body to do the breathing, or even worse, you don't have to let the pains do the breathing. When you're aware of the pains in the body and not much else, then as you breathe in, it feels like the painful areas are the ones actually doing the work.

So think of breath as being an energy cocoon that's in the body and a little bit outside the body as well. Its boundaries are not all that clearly defined. The quality of this cocoon is that it breathes in, breathes out, expands, contracts. But it's all one cocoon. Try to hold that perception in mind and see if it helps you settle down and, at the very least, helps you get into the kind of concentration the Buddha taught, which is to have a full-body awareness.

If you can see the breath as being simply air coming in and out through the nose, it's hard to relate that to the whole body. If you do, you have to think of other things in the body. But if you realize that breath is an energy flow, that it's a property of the wind property, or an aspect of the wind property, then you realize that it's everywhere in the body. So let the breath do the breathing. And you can nudge it to make it longer, shorter, deeper, more shallow—whatever feels good for the body right now, whatever the body needs. Try to do this in a way where you feel like you're settling in, because one of the important aspects of getting the mind in right concentration is that you give it a place where you can stay for long periods of time and not feel that you have to move.

We're not here to jump through jhana hoops, where we have to say, "Spend seven minutes in the first jhana, now seven minutes in the second." Stay right here. Now, your relationship to the breath will develop as you stay right here, as will your relationship to the feelings that come with the breath: feelings of ease, feelings of fullness or refreshment. As long as they feel refreshing, stay with them. When they begin to seem a little bit too much, then you think of a more subtle level of energy in the body, a more subtle level of breath. It's there.

Just focus in on that and let the movements of the rapture or the refreshment or whatever—let them take care of themselves. Now, thoughts will come up as you're doing this. In the beginning, all you have to do is just tell yourself, "They're not part of this process right now." They're not relevant to what you're doing. Sometimes they'll be really insistent and you'll have to think a little bit about them to get rid of them. But try to think about them in ways that can untangle you from them as quickly as possible.

Remind yourself you're trying to get in touch with a level of awareness that really doesn't have a history. It doesn't have stories. We have our stories about what happened to us when we were young, what may have happened to us before we were born. But there's an aspect of awareness that doesn't have those stories, doesn't have to carry them around. Try to get in touch with that aspect of your awareness. Anything that comes up that reminds you of who you are or what's happening in your life—you say, "This is not relevant right now."

Try to find something timeless. Let that be the thought that helps to extricate you. Or, if that one doesn't work, you can try other ways of thinking about what's happened to you in the past in terms of kamma. Think about the vast expanses of time during which kamma has gone back and forth, back and forth—you've been victim and victimizer who knows how many times—whatever helps give you a perspective on your thoughts and allows you to put them aside so that you can settle in here and have a real sense of feeling at home.

And then when you can stay here, you get the second step in the rite of passage which is to allow some of those thoughts back in. What's different is that now they're in your territory. You're not wandering out into their territory. And that's what makes all the difference. There's an image in the Canon of monkeys wandering out of their territory and getting into areas where hunters have laid traps. They get caught by the traps, skewered, and carried off. But if they stay in their own territory—the areas where the hunters can't go—they're safe. If you're thinking of yourself out in the world, or thinking of yourself in terms of the identity that the world has given you and that you've adopted as you've been

participating in the world, in terms of the pleasures you get from the world—that's going to be the territory where the hunters can get you.

But if you have this sense of belonging right here in the present moment—with your awareness filling the body, your sense of the breath energy filling the body, a sense of ease filling the body—this is your territory. And now when thoughts come in here, they're here on your terms.

Ajaan Chah has a nice image. He says it's as if you have a house where there's one chair, and as long as you're sitting in the chair, whoever else comes into the house has to stand and they're subject to your orders as to what they have to do. If you leave the chair and leave the house, they can get you. You're in their territory. But if you can look at the thoughts that come in in your territory, then you can ask yourself, "Okay, where does this thought lead? Does this lead to my true happiness, or does it lead away?" Remind yourself that true happiness is going to be harmless. It's not a selfish thing. It comes from developing your internal resources in a way where you become more generous, more virtuous, wiser. It's all to the good.

Then you can start questioning all the other voices that pull in other directions and say, "What do they know?" For me, that was one of the big turnarounds in my practice when I went over to Thailand. I was practicing meditation and it was during the Vietnam War. You could hear the bombers going overhead. Three a.m. every morning they were on their way to drop bombs in Vietnam and Cambodia. I kept thinking, "Here I am just focusing on my own breath, being very selfish." But I began to realize that the voices in my head that I'd come to identify with were the voices I'd picked up from different people. That was the voice of my mother, that was the voice of my father, telling me I shouldn't be doing this. And I had to realize, "What do they know of this? This is an area that they haven't gone to."

And don't think that this applies just to people who are raised in countries that aren't Buddhist. Ajaan Fuang had a lot of students who were getting a lot of flack from their parents for practicing. Generally in Thai society, it's okay to go to the monastery, to go to the temples and make merit. But if you're actually meditating, well, then you're getting a little bit out of your parents' control. So Ajaan Fuang had to teach his Thai students, "Okay, you've got to ask yourself, 'What do they know?' The fact that you're finding a happiness that they don't understand, that bothers them. It doesn't fit into their worldview. And so you have to ask yourself, 'Are you going to let yourself be a prisoner of their worldview, or are you going to get out?' And if getting out meant that you were

going to be ungrateful, ungenerous, that would be a bad thing. But this is not the case.”

At the same time that I was sorting through the thoughts that I was getting from my parents, Ajaan Fuang kept reminding me, “You’ve got to have gratitude for what they have done, the good things they’ve done for you.” So it’s not just a simple rebellion where you have been taught ‘A’ all your life and now you’re just going to say, “Well, I’m going to hold onto ‘not-A.’”

There are lots of different things that you have to sort out. But getting the mind into concentration gives you a place where you can do this sorting. And you can do it with full alertness, full awareness. As you keep doing it, your discernment is going to grow as well. You remind yourself that you’re motivated by compassion, both for yourself and for others, and that you’re happy you’ve found a path that allows you to find your true happiness without having to harm anyone at all.

A lot of Western psychology is built on the idea that, on the one hand, you’ve got your desires for happiness, and they’re pretty wild and untamable. And then, on the other hand, you’ve got the strictures of society that tell you what you’ve got to do. And they have very little to do with your true happiness. A lot of them serve what society thinks is in its own best interest. And you’re caught between those two impulses, whereas the Buddha says No. He’s got a different set of shoulds that really are for your true happiness.

So even though your desires for happiness may be uncontrollable in some areas, they’ve got the basic idea right: that happiness is a good thing. Then the next step is, “How do you find it in such a way that you’re going to have a true happiness, a happiness that’s not going to change?” That’s when you have to learn how to be a little bit wiser, more compassionate, more alert to your actions and the results of your actions so that what you actually do and say and think is in line with your ideals. That’s the quality that the Buddha calls purity.

So wisdom, compassion, purity—these are the qualities of the Buddha. These are qualities that come from practicing this rite of passage aimed at true happiness. And it’s not a rite of passage where all bets are off and anything can happen. There is a direction to this. It’s not like we’re just getting into the present moment and saying, “Well, wherever the present moment is going to lead me, that’s fine.” We’re doing this because we have a very clear idea of what we want: a true happiness, a harmless happiness. And that ideal will get even clearer as we finally discover that such a thing is possible, and that we’re capable of doing it.

So the choice is yours—if you want to take on this goal. But it’s a really good one. I can’t think of anything in the world that would be better.