

Serenity

January 13, 2019

As we meditate, we try to bring the mind to a state of calm and serenity. But you notice if you look at the Buddha's explanations for the factors for awakening, there are times when serenity is appropriate and times when it's not. The times when it's not doesn't mean that you're not going to try to aim there eventually. Simply that if the mind is sluggish, if your body lacks energy, you first have to energize it. *Then* you calm it down. Otherwise, if you simply try to calm it down from the very beginning, you fall asleep.

This may be one of the reasons why Ajaan Lee, when he begins his breath meditation instructions, tells you to breathe in and out deep and long, three times, seven times, just to air out the body, air out the mind: to make sure you have enough energy before you start calming things down. This is also one of the reasons why, in the factors for awakening, rapture comes before serenity: to create a sense of energy in the body, energy in the mind so that when you calm things down you can still be bright and alert—because that's what we're looking for: a state of concentration that's very alert.

So notice if you need some energizing and do that first. Think in ways that are energizing. Breathe in ways that are energizing. Think of the Buddha's analysis of how we fabricate the present moment by the way we talk to ourselves, by the way we breathe, and by our feelings and perceptions. Or to put them in another order: bodily fabrication: the breath; verbal fabrication: how you talk to yourself; mental fabrication: perceptions and feelings. So if, when analyzing your state of mind, you find that you're feeling sluggish, breathe in a way that's energizing. Talk to yourself in a way that gives you some energy. Think of images that stir up energy—like the forest ajaans, who use images of going out into battle or working on a skill to remind you that you're not here just trying to have a moment of calm and relaxation. There's work to be done here, problems to be solved, battles to be won.

So hold helpful perceptions in mind. What kind of perception of the breath gives you energy? Hold that perception in mind until you get a sense of fullness, or rapture. The Pali word for rapture here, *pīti*, can also be translated as refreshment: simply feeling refreshed by the way you breathe, by the way you're sitting here, by the way you're relating to your body. Then you can allow things to grow calm.

Now, if you start out already with too much energy, you have to avoid adding more energy. That's when you have to simply calm things down right from the start.

Here again, remember the three different types of fabrication. Breathe calmly. Talk to yourself in a way that's calming. If you have any distracting thoughts, talk to yourself in a way that reminds you that you don't have to pay attention to them. You're not responsible for the thoughts. And, for the time being, they have no meaning. Think of them that way: They're just the mind's empty chatter or the play of images on a movie screen—red, yellow, green, blue. They have meaning only if you *give* them meaning. If particular thoughts are really insistent, try to think in ways that counteract them. With thoughts of lust, you can think about the unattractiveness of the body. With thoughts of anger, you can think about your own well-being and your need for goodwill to maintain your well-being. In other words, find a calming antidote.

Then, after things have calmed down a little bit, remind yourself that even though there may still be a little bit of chatter in the mind, and thoughts may still be appearing here and there, you don't have to pay them any attention. You can breathe right through them. If you can locate the part of the body that's tensed up around a particular thought, try to breathe through that little pattern of tension. Or you can think of yourself as being like a spider on a web. If a thought appears in the left hand corner of the web, you can go over to the left hand corner, breathe through it, then go back to your center. If a thought appears and it's related to some tension in your knee, move your attention down to the knee, breathe through that, and then return to your center.

The effect of all this is to gain a sense of detachment from your thoughts. You're not so interested in what you're thinking. That's how the mind can happily grow calm.

We spend so much of our time listening to our thoughts, trying to straighten them out if we don't like them, feeling that they're really important. The thought comes up and you ask yourself, "What does this mean in terms of the world? What does it mean in terms of me? What does it show me about my psyche?"—all kinds of ways you can get interested in your thinking. You have to learn how to un-think those ways, to hold a new perception in mind: that the skill of getting the mind quiet is much more interesting and valuable than your ability to think right now. If you *are* going to be thinking, think about how to still the mind, to bring the mind to serenity, to calm.

As for pains in the body, think about how you can breathe around the pain or through the pain. Find a spot in the body where you can create a sense of well-being by the way you breathe. That gives you a foundation you can stand on. You don't have to go jumping into the pain. Stay in your spot and, as the breath energy

there gets good, think of it spreading through the pain so that the pain doesn't form a wall.

Then you can look at the perceptions you have around the pain. Ask yourself, "Is it one big solid pain, or is it made up of little moments of pain?" You're trying to find a perception that's more calming, and the perception of little moments of sensation is more calming to the mind than the perception of a solid block of pain. Then if you think of the pain moments going away from you as they arise, instead of coming at you, that, too, is more calming. You could also hold in mind the perception that the pain is one thing, the body is something else, and your awareness is something else. After all, the body is composed of four elements: earth, water, wind, fire—or solidity, coolness, warmth, energy. The pain is something else entirely from those four things. Your awareness is something else. They may all seem to be in the same space, but they're on a different level, a different frequency. Hold that perception in mind.

When you see that these perceptions are true and you can hold onto them, you'll find that the pain has much less of an effect on the mind—and that the problem really wasn't with the pain to begin with. It was with the perceptions you circled around the pain, saying, "The pain is invading my space. The pain is invading my knee, my back. *I* am being pained by it. It has a bad intention toward me. It's coming at me." Those perceptions stir up the mind. So you replace them with perceptions that are more calming.

These are some of the ways you use those three different kinds of fabrication to get past the barriers to getting the mind into serenity and concentration. You begin to settle down and gain a sense of stillness.

The problem is that once the mind gets into concentration, it can still stir itself up. Rapture comes. Sometimes it really is rapturous and very strong. Some people get a strong sense of pressure in, say, the chest, in the head. The more they concentrate, the stronger the pressure grows and the harder it is to deal with. Here again, though, you think about how you're breathing, what perception you're holding in mind. Sometimes, as you breathe in, the breath energy pulls up into the head or concentrates in the chest. So you want to think of the breath going down: out the legs, out the arms, out the soles of the feet, out the palms of the hands. Hold that perception in mind. And remind yourself that there are many levels of breath energy in the body. If you're focusing on one that's energizing and becomes unpleasant, then—after you've opened up all the escape channels—try to tune in to a calmer energy in the same spot where there's the excited energy.

It's like digging a well. When I was living in Wat Asokaram, they had a constant problem because the monastery was right at the edge of the sea, and yet they needed to dig wells there. There was no public water coming in from outside. They discovered that if you dug down to one level you'd get salt water, and on another level you'd get fresh water—and then another level, more salt water. There were layers and layers. The problem was that the layers would sometimes shift. A well that had been bringing in fresh water suddenly would bring in salt water. So they had to dig a new well, right at the same spot, but at a new depth. You can hold that image in mind, that your body has many layers of breath energy. Focus in on the layer that's appropriate right now. If you need a sense of refreshment and energy, focus in on one that's energizing. If you need one that's more calming, try a level that's more calming.

And ask yourself about your perceptions concerning the body. If there's a perception that the energy is bottled up in the body, that means you're perceiving a membrane someplace that can hold it in. Try to hold a perception in mind that there is nothing that holds energy in. It's more of an energy field with wide-open boundaries. The energy can go in and out of the body, and doesn't have to be contained here. There's nothing pushing it against anything else. It can flow freely in, freely out through all the pores of the skin, or through the spaces between the atoms of the body. Then the sense of oppression can go away.

There are some people who have trouble with feelings of rapture because they've had near-drowning experiences. They say that when you almost drown, there's a point where there's a strong sense of fullness in the body—and feelings of rapture can seem very much like that. So when you're meditating and you feel oppressed by the rapture, you can hold in mind the perception that you're not surrounded by water. You're surrounded by air; you're surrounded by space. You're not going to suffocate; you're not going to drown.

I had a student who, after a couple years of meditation, came to me and said, "I've got to stop doing breath meditation. Every time I focus on the breath, I get this strong sense of fullness." And I said to her, "That's what a lot of people *want*." She said she didn't like it. I asked her, "Have you had any near-drowning experiences?" And she said, "Yes, twice." So I told her, "Work on a perception that allows you to remind yourself you're not surrounded by water." So she came up with an image of herself as being a peninsula surrounded by air. That helped her get over her fear of that sensation and calmed her down.

This is a frequent problem because even though there may be a part of the mind that feels threatened by the fullness, there may be a part of the mind that

really likes it and doesn't want to let it go. But then the holding-on starts making it excessive.

So you have to remind yourself: Deeper concentration lets the sense of fullness go. That, too, is a helpful perception and a helpful thing to say to yourself. Focus in on a subtler level and that sense of fullness will be there together with the subtler level for a while. But because you're not focusing so much on the sense of fullness, eventually it dissipates, and the mind gets into a state of concentration and serenity that's deeper than the sense of being full.

Then think of the breath energy connecting everywhere throughout the body. There's no need to pull the breath in or push the breath out. There's a sense of sufficiency. It may happen that the breath stops. Don't be afraid of its stopping. If you need to breathe, you'll breathe. You're not suppressing it. If you try to suppress it or to make it stop, there will be a problem, but here you're not trying to make it stop. You're just allowing everything in the body to connect. The fact that everything is connected and wide-open means that whatever energy needs you have are being met simply by having everything connected and there's no felt need to breathe. Remind yourself that everything is okay. This perception will help you settle in there and feel at home rather than feeling threatened.

So the process of getting the mind into concentration is one of deeper and deeper stillness, deeper and deeper calm. Sometimes it will happen simply on its own. The mind is ready to rest and it rests. But you want to make sure that, in resting, you stay alert and awake. So you have to use some discernment in getting the state of calm just right, giving yourself more energy if you're coming to the meditation feeling sluggish or tired. Or if you're feeling frenetic, over-energetic, and wired, start in with the calm right there, using the different types of fabrication—the breath, the way your mind talks to itself, your perceptions, your feelings—to calm things down. And in arriving at calm here, you're gaining some important lessons in discernment, in using the factor of analysis of qualities. It's in this way that all the factors for awakening come together. Each one provides an important part of the mix that gets the path just right.

So in calming the mind down, don't be afraid to use your discernment. Don't be afraid to analyze things. In fact, your ability to analyze things means that you'll be able to deal with the times when the mind has trouble settling down, because you've learned how to figure out what are the blocks, what are the obstacles, and how to get around them.

Ajaan Fuang noticed that there were two types of people when it came to meditation: those who found that getting the mind quiet and calm was really easy and those who didn't. He called them people who didn't think enough and people

who thought too much. The problem with the people who don't think enough, even though they find that it's easy to get the mind still, is that when they *do* run into obstacles, they don't know what to do. What used to be easy is suddenly hard, and they don't know how to get around obstacles. The problem with the people who think too much is that they easily get discouraged in the beginning. They wonder, "*When* is my mind ever going to settle down?" But if they stick with it and use these different types of fabrication—understanding how the mind is shaped by them, how the sense of the body is shaped by them—then meditation becomes a real skill. You find that you can meditate in more and more difficult environments and deal with problems in the body, problems in the mind as they come up because you've got the key to figuring them out and bringing the mind to serenity and calm.