

Food, Shelter & Work

April 5, 2019

Try to get both the body and the mind in position. The body in position: As you're sitting here right now, place your hands in your lap, palms up, keep your eyes closed and your back comfortably straight. The mind in position: Think thoughts of goodwill, as we did in the chant just now: "May I be happy. May all beings be happy." You don't want to take any issues with anybody into your meditation, so put all the issues of the day aside.

The goodwill is there to create the context for what you're doing right now. If any thoughts come up in the course of the sit that are not related to your breath, just have goodwill for any of the people involved, goodwill for yourself, and then go back to the breath.

Now focus your attention on the breath. As you breathe in, take a couple of good, long, deep in-and-out breaths, and notice where you feel the breathing in the body. Think of the breath not so much as the air coming in and out through the nose, but as the movement of energy in the body. Where do you feel that energy most prominently? Focus your attention there and then ask yourself if it's comfortable. What kind of breathing would be more comfortable?

You can just pose that question in the mind and see how the body responds. If it doesn't seem to respond, you can test it a little bit. Try long breathing for a while, short breathing, in long/out short, in short/out long. Think of the breath energy flowing through the body in different ways: down the front, down the back, and all around you—because as we get the mind concentrated, we're aiming at developing a centered but broad awareness.

One spot in your awareness will be more prominent than the others, but you don't want it to block out the others. You want everything in the body to be connected. So as you breathe in, think of the whole body breathing in; as you breathe out, the whole body breathing out. Whatever sense of ease you can get from the breath, allow it to spread through the body as well.

We're creating a home for the mind and we're also feeding the mind. This is a point that Ajaan Suwat would make. He was the founder of our monastery here. He passed away 17 years ago today. That's quite an amount of time already. People who were born then are almost adults. But he left behind a lot of things for us in the form of his teachings. In fact, he was the one who thought up the idea of having a monastery here in the first place.

It's good to think about Ajaan Suwat's teachings. And one of them was this: We're trying to create a home for the mind here, a place where you feel at ease—where you feel like you belong. We're also feeding the mind, because the mind is hungry. It doesn't just sit here, waiting for things to come. It's not one of those animals in the sea that latches on to a rock and contents itself with whatever the water currents bring its way. We're out looking for things to feed our needs. If we don't give the mind something good to feed on right here, right now, it's going to look for whatever it can find to feed on someplace else.

So think about the pleasure you can create by breathing well as food for the mind. The mind likes pleasure. If it doesn't get pleasure here, who knows where it's going to go? So try to be as interested as you possibly can in how the breathing goes and in the different ways you can relate to it. As the breath gets more comfortable, you feel well fed. You feel rested. And you're in a safe place, what the Buddha calls the body in and of itself.

In other words, you're not thinking about the body as it relates to the world, how other people might view it, or whether it's up to the work you might have to do in the world. You're simply with the sensation of how your body feels right here, right now.

And, as the Buddha said, that's your safe territory. If you wander outside of this, who knows what's going to get you? The image he gives is of a quail. If the quail stays in a ploughed-up field, it's safe because it can hide behind rocks. But one day, one quail left the field. A hawk swooped down and carried it off. And the quail lamented, "Oh, my lack of good merit! If I'd been in my ancestral home, this hawk wouldn't have got me. This hawk would have been no match for me."

Now the hawk was peeved by this little, tiny quail saying things like that. So he said, "Okay, where is your ancestral home?" The quail said it was a field with all the stones ploughed up. So the hawk said, "Okay, go there, but you won't escape me."

So the quail goes down and stands on one of the stones. He starts taunting the hawk. The hawk swoops down again. This time, though, the quail, as he sees the hawk coming at it full speed, slips behind the stone. The hawk shatters his breast on the stone and dies.

The Buddha gave this as an analogy for the mind with the body in and of itself, not wandering out after the kinds of sights, sounds, smells, tastes, tactile sensations, or thoughts about those things that we normally use to feed the mind—and which we try to make into our homes. But they're not really good homes. They keep disintegrating on us. And all too often, we end up doing unskillful things in order to get them back, or to get new ones.

So here's a safe place to find a sense of well-being, with a sense of belonging. When the mind is safe like this, it settles down and is willing to do the work that needs to be done.

As you settle down, you find that even as the mind gets still, there will still be little disturbances here and there. And as Ajaan Suwat would say, see those as stress. They may be subtle, but you want to be really picky about what kind of mind state you're going to accept here as your home.

The Buddha wasn't the sort of person to teach us to simply accept whatever comes up—if it's pain, accept the pain, and if there's pleasure, accept the pleasure. As he said, at the very least, replace unskillful pleasures and pains with skillful pleasures and pains. And beyond that, it is possible to breathe in a way that gives rise to pleasure, gives rise even to rapture, feelings of fullness and refreshment. And they're part of the path. The duty of mindfulness, he says, is actually to give rise to skillful qualities in the mind and make sure they *don't* pass away. So we're not just here watching things coming and going.

Because the mind already has this tendency to want to feed, and because it is proactive, allow it to be proactive in figuring out what would be a better form of well-being for it. In other words, instead of lowering your standards—and just accepting whatever—you raise the standards. The slightest bit of movement in the mind: You look into it. The slightest bit of stress in the breath: You look into it and try to untangle it. This way, you get to work in a comfortable place. You get to work at home. You're well fed. And the mind gets to know itself a lot better because greed, aversion, and delusion, when they first come, come in subtle forms. If you want to see why the mind goes for them, you've got to see them right as they arise. And being with the breath is a good place to position yourself so as to see that.

So any little disturbance is potentially greed, aversion, delusion, fear, or jealousy. Sometimes it's not much in and of itself, this little stirring in the mind. But there's some other part of the mind that wants some action, wants a little greed, wants a little aversion, and takes whatever excuse it can get to go in that direction. You want to catch the mind in the act. This is where you do it, right here at the breath, because the breath is where the body and the mind meet.

As long as you're with the breath, you know you're in the context of the present moment so you can see what's coming as it's coming—not as a theory or an abstraction, but as an actual event in the mind, sometimes reflected in the breath. It's all happening right here.

So we develop a sense of well-being, first to soothe the mind so that it feels like it belongs here, to feed the mind. But then when it's soothed and fed, we don't

just let it lie around. We give it work to do, but it's work we can do with a sense of well-being.

Ajaan Lee, another teacher of the forest tradition, had a nice image. He says when we're running around under the power of greed, aversion, and delusion, it's like we're being slaves to crooks and thieves. They get us to do their dirty work and then they run away and let us suffer the results. Whereas when we do the work of meditation, we're working for the Buddha. Really, we're working for ourselves, but the Buddha teaches us how to work for ourselves in a way where we can do honorable and upstanding things, good work, work that is for our well-being.

So now that you're fed, sheltered, do the good work of seeing where the mind creates suffering for itself and doesn't have to. The less suffering you create for yourself, the less of a burden you'll be for yourself and for others. So it's good work all around.