Looking for Happiness Inside

April 5, 2014

We chant that passage every morning, every night: “May you forever be well.” The question is, “How are you going to be forever well when there’s aging, illness, death, and separation all around?”

The Buddha realized that the only answer is that you have to look for something that doesn’t age, grow ill, or die, something that’s not separated from things you depend on. That can be found only inside.

This is why we meditate: to find that thing.

Ajaan Suwat, the monk who founded our monastery: Shortly before he died—he’d been in a bad automobile accident and suffered brain damage—he commented to me that his mind was sending him a lot of strange perceptions, his brain wasn’t functioning. But at least he had the mindfulness to know that it was strange and not fall for whatever the brain was sending him.

He stopped for a second and then said, “But that thing I got from the meditation, that hasn’t been touched.” It’s something can be found inside. We touch it but then nothing else can touch it. That’s what we’re looking for.

How are you going to find it? It requires a lot of discernment to see what you’re doing to cover it up. There is something that’s uncaused. It’s potentially always there, which means we can’t see it because our discernment isn’t sharp enough. So we need to sharpen our discernment. How do you do that? You get the mind to be very still so that it can detect slight movements of the mind.

These movements are things you do day in, day out, to the point where we hardly notice them. You’ve got to come back and refamiliarize yourself with them. Look at the present moment with new eyes.

Start with the breath: Look at the breath in a new way. We usually think of the breath as the air coming in and out of the lungs. But the Buddha wants you to look at what it is in the body that makes the air come in and lets it go out. What is that energy flow? Look at that, and notice how the energy flow feels. There are healthy energy flows; there are unhealthy ones. You want to promote a healthy one inside because it makes it a lot easier to stay here in the present moment so that you can watch things carefully.

In this way, you give rise to what’s called a state of becoming, the sense of you right here in the world of the body right here right now. You try to nurture that. You try to feed that, breathing in a way that feels good.

You can ask yourself, “When it feels good, what’s good about it?” You can try
different ways of breathing and see what feels best.

This is one of the ways in which you develop your discernment. After all, discernment isn’t just watching things, it’s also learning how to judge things: Which is better than something else? Is long breathing better or short breathing better? You start out that way. Then those questions move deeper and deeper into the mind. But first you start with the breath.

This is a good place to make yourself sensitive to the present moment. We’re sensitive to so many things outside and yet we miss a lot of what’s happening right here, right now, inside us. The breath is obviously something happening right here, right now, so you work with that.

As you’re working with the breath, you get a stronger and stronger sense of your mind here in the present moment—your awareness here in the present moment—until ultimately the breath gets so refined and the breath energy so fills the body that the in-and-out breath gets shorter.

Don’t try to make it shorter. Think instead of the breath energy—all the channels, all the nerves, all the different ways that the breath energy can flow in the body—getting connected.

Ajaan Lee’s image is of cutting a network of roads through a wilderness. The more the roads are connected, the more you can get around. I remember when I first went to Thailand, there were basically two main roads leading north out of Bangkok. One when north up to Chiang Mai, and the other one to the northeast, up to Udon. And even though Chiang Mai was closer to Udon than it was to Bangkok, if you had to go to Udon from Chiang Mai, you had to go down to Bangkok and then back up again, because there were just the two main roads. Now they’ve got roads all over the place, and it’s very easy to get around.

You want to kind of promote that same sense of the flow of the breath energy in the body, moving around in the body, connecting everything. When everything’s connected, there’s no sense of lack.

The breath will then grow naturally shorter on its own. And as the breath gets more and more still, then you can see the movements of the mind that much more clearly. There’s less interference.

It’s like the shuffling noise here in the sala. When we’re chanting you don’t hear it. Then when everyone’s still, you can hear the shuffling.

It’s the same in your mind. When the breath is very, very still, you see movements in the mind that you didn’t notice before.

You see how the mind’s perceptions, say, create a sense of where your body is right now and what its shape is, and how those perceptions can be dropped.

Then what have you got? Just a cloud of little sensation points. If you want, you
can focus on the space between the points. That gets even more refined. You keep going deeper and deeper into your awareness of the present moment.

You begin to see how so much of it is constructed. You put it together by focusing on some feelings here or focusing on perceptions there, or thinking about this, evaluating that, noticing this, noticing that. The things you notice, the things you pay attention to: Those choices are going to shape your experience. What you try to do now is to deconstruct them, so that you can see more and more subtle layers of stillness inside—and then more and more subtle layers of movement that you didn't detect before.

This is the process of meditation that goes deeper and deeper right here, right here, right here. Not deeper in the sense that it's going to go down into the earth but deeper inside, deeper into levels of subtlety. There's a sense that you're getting closer and closer and closer to the center of your awareness.

You can see even more subtle movements right there, the part of the mind that wants to direct this and say, “Focus here, focus there.” That gets thrown into sharp relief.

You can ask yourself, “Who’s talking to whom in here?” You start questioning the very, very basic movements of the mind, until you see an opening where there are no movements of the mind at all.

That may sound very abstract, but once you get there, you realize that it really is the end of all suffering and there's nothing lacking there.

Some people are afraid that if you go to nibbana, you'll miss all your old friends or the pleasures of the senses. But the Buddha kept saying, “Don’t think in those ways. There’s nothing missing, there’s nothing lacking there.”

We define ourselves around our families, our friends, our jobs, all these other things, and we’re afraid we’re going to lose them. But look at them very carefully. This is why the Buddha talks about aging, illness, and death so much. The happiness we’re looking for from other people: No matter how much they want to provide it, they can’t always be there. And if our happiness is built on things like that, it’s going to suffer.

So you need something stronger inside that you really can depend on. That’s why we’re looking in here, learning how to look really, really carefully in here.

There’s no other safe place on Earth or in any world. As long as the mind is creating worlds, it’s going to create worlds that will fall apart. But this is something you don’t create. It’s something you find, which is something very different.

When you’ve found it, then no matter what happens, you’ve got something safe. In Ajaan Suwat’s case, what happened was a bad accident, but still he had this “thing” inside, as he said. No accident could touch it.
Until you find it, be confident that it’s there. Then when you *do* find it, you don’t have to believe in it anymore—because it’s there.

There’s that famous passage where the Buddha asks Ven. Sariputta, “Do you believe that when the five faculties of conviction, persistence, mindfulness, concentration, and discernment are developed that they lead to the deathless?” And Sariputta says, “No, I don’t believe that. I know.” Try to get to the point where you can say that, too.