

No Resistance

June 23, 2014

Sometimes it seems that when you try to focus on the breath, the distracting sounds around you, other distracting things around you, impinge even more on the mind. But that's simply because when you're with the breath, there are not a lot of complications. When you're thinking a complex thought, you have to block things out. The mind is very good at blocking things out when you're thinking about something you're really interested in, something that requires a lot of analysis or a lot of details.

The breath doesn't have a lot of complex details. And because it places much less of a burden on the mind, you suddenly find yourself open to other influences coming in from outside. So you have to be especially careful to stay focused right on the breath. You can't wait for everything else around you to get quiet, even though we do try to meditate in places that are conducive like this. It's quiet outside right now. There's not much going on. Still, you can't limit your meditation just to ideal circumstances. You want to be able to maintain your focus regardless of what else is going on.

This is a very important part of the meditation, that we don't pay attention to distracting things. Fortunately, the fact that there are noises out there and that you can recognize them doesn't mean that you're not really in concentration, but you try to give them as little attention as possible and magnify the breath as much as you can.

This is one of the reasons why it's useful to think of the breath as a whole-body process. You're not focused just on one spot. Your attention will be primarily on one spot but it's not totally there. Think of the breath coming in and out through the whole body. Whatever sense of ease comes along with the breath, let that be whole-body as well. Think of the breath as occupying every square inch of your awareness.

This is what it means to have singleness of preoccupation. In other words, your mind is with one thing, and the one thing fills your awareness. Now, there's an openness to this. A good image is to think of the awareness as like the screen on a window. The breeze can come through the screen because the screen doesn't catch the breeze. And for the same reason, the screen isn't moved by the breeze. In other words, neither side disturbs the other. You're not disturbed by the noises and, in Ajaan Chah's phrase, you're not disturbing the noise.

He talks about when he was a young monk and was upset that he couldn't get his mind to focus on the breath, and so he found some pieces of clay and stuck them in his ears. He realized that that didn't really make that much of a difference— and he thought even further that if being deaf were an important part of the meditation, then deaf people would have a better chance of getting concentrated than people who could hear, and that this would be a path for deaf people. But it's not. It's for all people.

So you have to learn how to make the choice: what things you're going to focus on, what things you're going to pay attention to, and what things you're not. Then learn the skill of how to allow the things that you're not paying attention to occupy the same space, but without your going with them. This will be an especially important skill to develop as you're moving from concentration into discernment. Ajaan Maha Boowa talks about analyzing pain and realizing that pain may occupy the same space as the body does, but they're two separate things. If you can think of two separate things occupying the same space but not impinging on each other, that helps you make the separation.

So get some practice first by being still, being focused, and as for whatever else goes through the mind or comes into the senses, just let that pass, pass, pass right through. You realize that those things are not solid. There are spaces between the atoms in the body and there are spaces between the atoms of the air impinging on the ears. You can also think of spaces between your thoughts. They're sketches. They're not totally dense. They could pass right through. Just try to maintain that perception that you're with the breath, and whatever comes up, whatever is right here, it has to be breath for you to focus on it. Once you can stick with that perception, your concentration gets a lot stronger. And the ability to stick with a single perception like that will help you get into the more and more refined states of concentration.

As the movement of breath begins to calm down, and even your sense of the shape of the body begins to calm down and dissolve into little dots of sensation, it's going to be the perception you hold in mind that determines where you are and whether you're really in concentration or not. So focus on that single perception and focus on whatever sensations in the body correspond to that perception, support that perception. As for everything else, let it pass through, pass through.

When you don't put up resistance to it, you find that it doesn't hit you. It's like not having a body. It's because we have bodies that people can come up and hit us. The body offers resistance. If someone hit us with a stick, and it went right through the body without causing any change or damage to the body, that would be something else entirely. Well, try to have that quality of mind, that whatever comes through is not damaging your concentration.

I was teaching meditation one time in a room that had an extremely loud clock, and after the first session everybody opened their eyes and said, "That clock!" And I had to remind them "Did the clock destroy the breath? No, the breath was still there."

Different things will come passing into the range of your awareness, but you just hold on to the perception of the breath, the sensation of the breath. And as you develop this quality, you find you can meditate anywhere. Things will pass through, pass through. When you put up no resistance, nothing can come and push you. Whatever the noise is, whatever the thoughts going through your mind, remind yourself that they're not solid, and your awareness is not a solid. It is solid in the sense of being still and unmoving, but it's not a solid in the sense of being

a mass. In that way, you find that your concentration can coexist with all kinds things and actually gets stronger as a result because it's more precise.