

## *The Opportunity to Be Quiet*

*June 26, 2020*

There's a part of the mind that may sometimes tell you, "If only this task gets done, then I can really rest." But then, how many tasks have you done and found that there are more tasks to be done?

The work of the world is never done. When people retire, it's not because their work is done. It's because either they're too old and too weak to do the work, or they get pushed out—but the work is not done.

The world is a work in progress, and you can't wait for the work to get done for the mind to be able to really rest. You have to learn how to take rest in the midst of this construction site.

This is why the forest ajaans would often begin their meditation instructions not by going straight to the breath or whatever the topic is, but to some contemplations. Contemplations of the body—realizing that so many of the affairs of the world have to do with looking after the needs of the body, and yet what have you got? Liver, kidneys, spleen, stomach, lungs—nothing you'd like to invite over for dinner for conversation. Yet the needs of these things can rule so much of your life. It's good to stop and think: Can't the mind have some time for itself and not be a slave to the body? That's one contemplation.

You can think about how all the affairs of the world are inconstant, stressful, and not-self—that if you try to find your real happiness there, it's going to lead to disappointment.

In other words, think your way to stillness. Use these thoughts to cut through any thoughts that would send out their webs and say, "Let me think about this," and then connect this with that, and that with this. Any thought that extends in any direction, just think of your mind cutting through it.

There was a forest ajaan who was an expert at making axes. He liked to talk about how, as you meditate, you should think of having a knife in your hand, and anything that makes a connection anywhere, either in the body or the mind, just cut right through, cut right through.

This requires a strong sense that your true happiness is going to be in stillness. The Buddha's principle that there is no happiness other than peace: You really have to take that to heart. And when he says to see renunciation as rest, take that to heart, too.

Renunciation, here, is renunciation of anything that has to do with the five senses. And

when you stop to think about it—all the work of the world is involved in the five senses. So put that aside.

When the Buddha says to subdue greed and distress with reference to the world, use that thought: Anything that's an affair of the world—gain, loss, status, loss of status, praise, criticism, pleasure, and pain—you don't want them to get their vines around your mind. Try to cut through, cut through, cut through anything that would connect.

Even the thoughts in the mind that begin to send out little shoots: You've got to cut those off, too. The only thoughts you want are the ones that talk about how great it is to get the mind to be still, and how you've got this opportunity right here. You're able to breathe. You've got a mind that's aware. You know what to do.

Most people, if they were asked to just sit here and watch their breath for an hour, would be totally at a loss. But you've heard the instructions many times and you know that they're for your well-being. There's an ease and sense of fullness that can come when the breath is just right, and from the fact that you have only one duty right here, which is to develop the path. Although the path may seem to have lots of factors, remember that concentration is the central one. Everything else is there to help prop it up.

If the mind wanders off, you could either use right view, as when you're thinking thoughts that remind you of how you really do need to find some rest in the midst of the unfinished work of the world. Or you could use right resolve, right speech, right action. Right resolve is the intention to look for pleasure in a harmless way, by staying right here with the breath. Right speech is what you're talking to yourself about right now. That's the beginning of right speech. Right action: You're not doing anything harmful. Right livelihood: You're nourishing the body with the breath. Right effort: You're trying to stick with the breath the as best you can. Right mindfulness: You're with the body in and of itself, the breath as you're directly experiencing it right now. You don't have to think of anything beyond that—just the direct sensation of the breath.

All these factors keep reminding you that this is where you want to be, this is where you should be, and it's a good should—in other words, one that's for your own well-being.

You're being asked to exercise your freedom, and it's an opportunity that's really rare in the world. Everyone else wants to place burdens on you. The Buddha's teaching you how to take the burdens off.

The problem is that we internalize so many messages from outside: about how we have to

be responsible for this, we have to worry about that. They're so internalized that they seem to be us as they speak in the mind. You have to learn to see them as not-self.

We think about not-self as a perception that comes way at the end of the path, but it's a useful tool all the way along. After all, even before you practice, you're not-selfing things. Thoughts come into the mind and you say, "Nope, I don't want that." You don't identify with it; it just goes away. With things outside, issues outside, there are some where you say, "That's not my affair, that's not my business." That's not-selfing. So the mind is already used to not-selfing. It's just a question of learning how to do it skillfully—because sometimes we not-self things that we really should be responsible for.

Ajaan Suwat used to like to focus on the fact that the Buddha said that there are so many things that are not-self, not-self, but then he says we're the owners of our actions. This is something we are responsible for.

This is another reason why you should be focusing on getting the mind really still. Because actions come out of where? They come from your intentions. Your intentions come from where? They come from the mind. And if they come from an erratic mind, you really can't trust them. If they come from a mind that's really still, solid, secure, then you can put some more trust in your intentions, more trust in the fact that you're going to be shaping your life in a good way.

So when you think rightly, everything points to getting the mind to be really still and to appreciating the stillness, appreciating your opportunity to be still. Even if the mind can't settle down, if it still feels antsy about this, that or the other thing, at least remind yourself that you're heading in the right direction, trying to get the mind still, seeing the value of stillness.

There are so many people out there in the world who don't see the value of this at all. But you've learned that this is worthwhile. There's that Steven Colbert question, "Buddhism, huh? You wrap yourself up in a cloth, and you go sit under a tree, and you breathe?"

Well yes, and you'd be amazed at how many good things you can find in the mind if you just sit here and breathe: watching the breath, watching the mind, trying to keep the two together. Adjust the mind so that it's happy to be with the breath; adjust the breath so that it's a good place to be for the mind. Then hover around the two of them as they stay together. Let them have their peace, let them have their quiet, because a lot of really good things come out of the quiet mind.

The concentration not only gives us a pleasant abiding in the present moment, but it also

provides a good foundation for greater mindfulness and alertness. When the mind is quiet, you see things more clearly. You have your wits about you. One of the functions of mindfulness is to recognize when something unskillful has come up in the mind, and you want to nip it in the bud as fast as you can. The more quiet you are, the more likely you'll see it.

It's like raking the sand out here in the pad every day. The fact that we rake it every day allows us to see the tracks of whatever animals have come through. So sweep the mind so that any little footprints of thoughts will show up immediately.

At the same time, a still quiet mind provides a basis for you to look at the thoughts that come up and see why it is you go for them. Even though part of you knows that they're unskillful, why is there another part that wants them? When you're staying quiet, you're not following them, so you get to see them for what they are. You can hold them in check and examine them.

So this is a good place to be not only for the sense of well-being it gives while you're right here, but also as a foundation for more mindfulness, more alertness, more discernment, the kind of discernment that really can make you free—even from the need to do concentration, ultimately. But in the meantime, see your concentration, this opportunity to sit here with your mind quiet, as an exercise in freedom—freeing yourself from all the burdens of the world and from all the thoughts inside that would make you a slave to the world.

Learn to fully appreciate how good it is to be here fully present—your awareness filling the body, the breath filling the body, a sense of ease filling the body—knowing that it feels good and it's good for you.