

Close to the Heart

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Okay, time to practice. There are times when talk about practice is helpful and times when it gets in the way. The best way to solve that problem is simply to *do* the practice. When you talk about the practice, you can start getting lost in abstract space. You forget that the whole purpose of the Dhamma is to point into our hearts. The big issues that we carry around inside us – our fears, our sufferings, our whole sense of what life is all about: To the extent that talking about the practice helps to get perspective on these things, then it's useful. But the talk has to be part of a larger *doing* – doing something about those problems.

Sometimes the doing may seem strange. Here we are sitting, watching our breath. What does that do? It brings us close to the heart, very close to our minds. Of all the things we can know outside of our minds, the breath is the closest. As we're one-on-one with the breath, that changes our perspective on things. We let go of the outside distractions, and ultimately turn our attention to the other part of the one-on-one, which is the mind aware of what's going on in here.

Back when I was first ordained, Ajaan Fuang had me memorize the *Divine Mantra*, which, I must admit, struck me as kind of strange, as it centered on the six elements, a way of looking at things that felt very foreign. He had me chant it every evening. I was living alone up on the hill in Rayong, and would chant the *Divine Mantra* every evening just after dusk. After doing this for a while it became less of a weird aspect of Thai Buddhism and more of a friend as I sat there through the night, all by myself.

Finally, one evening it really hit me. I was going through the six elements, and when I finally got to the chant on consciousness I realized that I wasn't chanting about some foreign, abstract idea of consciousness. I was chanting about my own awareness, my own mind, my own heart, right here, right now. I felt as if a huge block of ice inside me just shattered. I was able to open up and realize that the meditation wasn't some strange foreign thing I was doing to myself. I hadn't consciously thought that it was, but subconsciously, deep down inside, there was a feeling that it was alien, something from another culture. That night it became mine: *my* awareness of *my* mind, *my* awareness of things really deep inside. The Dhamma was no longer a foreign mold that I was trying to impose on the mind. It became a message pointing to my deepest awareness. And I became aware of a real tenderness deep down – a tenderness not in the sense of being nice or fuzzy, but in the sense of having been wounded, of needing some help. There was a need for some healing there, and the meditation

was what it needed. I wouldn't say that I hadn't gained anything from the practice up to that point, but the quality of what I gained changed that night.

This is what we're working on as we're practicing. The term *patipat* in Thai means to practice, as when we're practicing the Dhamma, but it also means to look after somebody. Sometimes the Thai ajaans say, "We're not here to *patipat* the Buddha's teachings, we're here to *patipat* our own minds: to look after our own minds, our own hearts."

So although the words may seem foreign and the process of meditation mechanical – you're focusing on the breath, you're dealing with the mechanics of the breathing, how the breathing relates to the pains in the body – ultimately these things start getting closer and closer to your heart. As you learn to treat your heart with more sensitivity using the breath, using the understanding you gain from the Dhamma, after a while the heart begins to open up. It opens up and allows you to heal it. Without that opening up, there's going to be a resistance.

Now, this opening may happen suddenly or gradually, but the important point is that as you get to know the breath, get close to the breath, you're also getting closer and closer to your own mind, closer to the more sensitive parts of your mind. As you deal with the breath more precisely, with more sensitivity, you find that the mind is finally willing to open up to itself. Prior to that point it was used to being abused and misused and so it shut itself in, shut itself up, even against you. One part of the mind shut up against another part, and so the healing couldn't take place. Your conscious awareness has to learn to be a healing awareness, so that the parts of the mind that need to be healed will be willing to open up.

So an important part of the practice is sensitivity. Start out by getting very sensitive to the breath. Get to know how it feels in the different parts of the body, how different rhythms of breathing feel. It's not so much that you want to become a breath mechanic, although that's one of the side benefits. It's more that you try to develop your sensitivity to the present moment, your sensitivity to the least little bit of stress, the least little bit of harshness you're adding unnecessarily to the present moment. You gain more finesse with smoothing it out, evaporating it, dissolving it away. You begin to see that even the simple process of breathing can be done well or poorly. If you pay attention to it, it can be done well. That way, the simple fact that you've got a breath becomes more than just a means for keeping the body alive. It can actually be used to heal the body, to deal with different types of pain in the body. At the same time, it gets more and more healing for the mind.

As you become more sensitive to precisely how you approach the present moment, how you deal with the present moment, all those parts of the mind that shut themselves off because they didn't want to be mistreated seem to realize instinctively that there's better treatment in the offing. Your conscious awareness

is more of a healing awareness than it was before. This allows the rest of your awareness to begin opening up.

Those parts of the body that you often have trouble accessing even with the breath: There comes a time where your sensitivity reaches the point where they begin to open up, too. You may have noticed, when you really look at your inner sense of the body, that certain parts seem to be missing. There's a holding in, a tension that blocks things off. But as your sensitivity to the breath begins to get more and more subtle, the blockages dissolve and you realize that what seemed to be a physical blockage had its mental side as well. It's opening up now that you have the physical and mental tools to deal with it, along with the sensitivity to use those tools well.

So, your sensitivity to the present moment is a very important part of developing concentration, developing insight, and dealing with the whole problem of suffering, the burdens that the mind carries around. It gives you the tools you need to deal with all the unskillful mental states that seem to get lodged in the mind and do their damage in both body and mind, and yet that we're often afraid to deal with. When you're given the tools of not only the breath but also other perspectives of the Dhamma – and this is why talking about the Dhamma can be helpful at times, to gain a clear and precise sense of your tools – then you're ready to handle them.

When I was staying with Ajaan Fuang, the lessons didn't just come from the meditation technique. They also came from being around him, getting his perspective on things. I found myself learning a lot just by living with someone from a totally different background. I'd come up with a problem and mention it to him, and he'd look at me as though I'd come from the other side of the world – which, of course, I had. My way of looking at the problem seemed very natural to me, but to him it was extremely strange. Learning to see the strangeness of some of my problems was a useful exercise in getting outside of the problems for a while – sometimes for good. So, if our discussions help in that way, then they're useful discussions. They can give us a new perspective on our problems.

The real work, though, is something that's done inside, and often it's hardly even verbal at all. This is why the breath is such a good way of getting around a lot of our internal blockages. Instead of attacking the problem verbally, you come at it from the nonverbal side – the energy in the body – becoming sensitive to the side that gets around the mind's automatic nonverbal defenses. These patterns of blockage in the mind are what ignorance is all about. Hiding behind that ignorance are all the causes of suffering.

This is one of the scary parts of being born into any realm, especially the human realm and the realms below that. As you come into this life, you immediately meet with suffering – wham! immediately – and there's nobody to explain it to you. You're facing it head-on. Other people can comfort you, but they can't show you how to deal with it. So the mind comes up with all sorts of

jerry-rigged approaches, improvised approaches, to keep the suffering at bay. Then, even after we learn language, we carry those pre-verbal approaches toward suffering into our adult lives without realizing it. Often those approaches involve blocking, denial, and it's not just a mental blocking. It's a physical blocking as well.

So, as we're working with the breath and getting around some of these blockages, don't be surprised when the sleeping dogs – the things that seemed to be lying very peacefully in the mind – suddenly get stirred up. That's because the barrier behind which they were hiding has suddenly dissolved away. When that happens, you can use the sensitivity you've developed in the meditation – along with the understanding of the Dhamma you've developed by reading and listening, gaining a perspective on the whole issue of suffering and the end of suffering – and apply them directly to your own, immediate sufferings. The Buddha wasn't talking about suffering in the abstract; he was talking about the sufferings lodged right here in each person's heart, right here in *your* heart, right now. And the tools he offered are meant to come here into the heart, to the particular sufferings in the heart, where they can make all the difference.