

## *Social Anxiety*

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In one of Ajaan Lee's last Dhamma talks he compared life to taking a boat across an ocean. The problem out on the ocean is that there's no fresh water. For most of us meditation is like stopping in a port, picking up some fresh water, and putting it in the boat. Then we go out to sea and discover that we've run out of water, so we have to go back to port. As a result we don't get very far. If we're not careful, the winds will blow us away from the coast, and we'll find ourselves without any water at all.

In other words, when we meditate we pick up a good sense of ease, a sense of inner refreshment. It's like stocking up on water. But then we take it out and we pour the water out our eyes and ears, all over the place. So we have to come back, meditate some more, get some more water – back and forth like this. We never really stock up on enough water to take us across the ocean. So an important lesson we have to learn is how not to pour the water out. What this means is learning how to maintain your center with the breath, inside the body, even when you go outside and deal with other people. This is one of the big issues in any meditator's life.

Ajaan Lee has another passage where he compares the meditation to making the mind one and then turning it into zero. Now, when you have zeros, there are two things you can do with them. You can put them in front of numbers – in which case they have no meaning at all, you don't read them, they don't count – or else you put them after other numbers, in which case 1 turns into 10, and then 100, then 1,000, and then 10,000. If the zeros get put after, you've got lots of issues, but if the zeros get put first, no matter how many zeros you have, they don't add anything, don't burden the mind at all.

It's the same way with the mind: You make it zero and then you put the zeros first. Then when you deal with other people, what they say doesn't count. It's interesting that Ajaan Lee focuses on what other people say as one of the tests for a mind that's really at peace. The Buddha makes a similar point in one of the *Dhammapada* verses. "If, when other people say harsh things to you and you don't reverberate – like a cracked gong – that's a sign that you've attained true peace of mind." This might seem strange. Why does the test lie in how you react to what other people say?

The mind is very sensitive to this issue. We learn very early in our lives that our happiness is going to depend on how other people treat us. As children, we're surrounded by people a lot more powerful than we are, so there's always a sense of fear built into our relationships to the people around us. We become sensitive to other people's moods, sensitive to what they might do, what they might say. As a result, our center of gravity is placed outside because we're

afraid of them, and we try to put up a wall outside ourselves to protect ourselves from them.

What this means is that our psychic center of gravity gets moved outside the body. If you've ever taken any martial arts classes, you know that if your center of gravity is outside your body you're in bad shape. You're in a weak position.

Now the Buddha doesn't say to ignore other people and just be very selfish. He says there's a different way to approach the whole issue of happiness. In other words, you find a source for happiness that doesn't take anything away from anyone else, so you don't have to be afraid of other people. When you're not afraid of them, you find that you can actually be more compassionate to them. So developing and maintaining this center inside is not a selfish thing. The Buddha's not teaching you to be insensitive. He's just saying to put yourself in a stronger position and to trust that you're stronger by not trying to go outside and fix up people's moods and all the other things that we think we can do with other people when we're dealing with them. Just stay inside and have a sense of confidence that you're strong inside. After all, your source of happiness lies inside. Because it's not taking anything away from anybody else, you don't have to be afraid of them.

Especially when you can get your awareness to fill the whole body, when you get the breath flowing smoothly throughout the whole body: This smooth flow of energy builds up a kind of force field. An image in the Canon is that the meditator who's able to fill the body with awareness is like a door made out of solid wood. If you were to take a ball of string and throw it at the door, it wouldn't make any dent in the door at all. The mind filled with awareness, with the breath energy flowing smoothly, is the same sort of thing. It's solid. It resists outside influences.

But when your awareness *doesn't* fill the body like this, the Buddha says it's like a ball of wet clay into which somebody throws a stone. The stone makes a big dent in the clay. In other words, you're in a weak position, and you intuitively know you're in a weak position. Other people can invade your inner space. So you scramble around and try to build up all sorts of defenses. Because so much energy gets spent in the defenses, and the energy is outside the body, it knocks you off balance. You use up the water of your meditation, the refreshment of your meditation, very quickly this way.

The trick, as Ajaan Lee says, is to have a little distillery in the boat so that you can take the salt water and put it into the distillery, to turn it into fresh water. Then everywhere you go you've got fresh water. In other words, no matter where you go, you're right *here*: centered in the body, with your awareness filling the body. You're not leaving the body unprotected and you're not using up all your energy in those false outside defenses. You're creating a sense of energy here in the body, a sense of refreshment, and it's protecting you as well. This way you can travel around the world because there's salt water everywhere. If you've got the skill, you can turn it into fresh water – as much fresh water as you want.

So as you leave meditation, it's important that you watch to see: How does the mind move? How does it go flowing out your eyes and ears into the space outside your body? If you catch it and bring it back in, how is it going to complain? There's going to be a sense of fear, or a sense of uncertainty about trying to stay inside. In the beginning you may feel unprotected. *Don't listen to those voices.* Those are voices that took over your mind when you were a little child and didn't know anything. That was the best you could do at that time, but now you've got more skills, better skills, more understanding.

Learn how to reason with those voices: "Here's a good solid place, a good safe place, a secure place to be – right here inside the body – and you're operating from a position of strength." And just that much is not only a gift to yourself, but also the people around you. They'll sense the difference as well, and it makes your interaction with them a lot easier.

So learn to have some trust for this sense of being inside the body. The awareness that fills the body, the breath energy that fills the body, can protect you in a lot of ways. It can provide the nourishment and the refreshment you need at all times. At the same time, it develops a momentum in the practice. If you keep on creating all the water you need, when you have more than enough, you can share it with the people around you. Your sense of what it means to interact with people will change – will be a lot less fearful – and your sense of what it means to be refreshed will grow deeper and stronger.