

Don't Worry, Be Focused

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In several passages in the Canon, the Buddha says that the main thing to keep in mind if you suddenly find yourself approaching death is not to worry. Now, he's not saying don't worry about the state of your mind; or don't worry, everything is going to be okay; or don't worry, be happy. He's basically saying don't worry, be focused. Stay centered and still, because the mind is going to grab at things if it hasn't been trained. If you've been responsible for various things in your life, you suddenly realize you can't be responsible for them anymore. If you're attached to certain things, you have to let go—and for the untrained mind that's very difficult. You're going to flail around, trying to grab onto things that you can't grab onto anymore, and to weigh yourself down with concerns about things you can't be responsible for anymore, which is why you have to practice ahead of time.

As Ajaan Fuang used to say, "When you meditate, you're actually practicing how to die." You drop all your other concerns and focus on the state of your mind. While you have a breath to focus on, you focus on the breath as a place to gather the mind, and then you try to make sure that it doesn't go sticking its arms or head out like a turtle.

A turtle is in its shell, there's a fox outside, and the turtle knows that if it sticks its head out, or its tail, or any of its legs, the fox is going to get it, so it has to stay inside its shell. This is a skill you have to practice because it's so easy—as you tell yourself you're going to stay with the breath—for other members of the mind's committee to have other ideas. Here you've got a whole hour. You could think about all kinds of things, and as soon as your mindfulness lapses, or your alertness lapses, there they go.

The mind goes out for two sorts of reasons. One, is because of misunderstanding and two, something's wrong with your energy. Now, if it's a case of misunderstanding, the mind tells itself you would really rather think about this or you've got to think about that, whatever. You have to learn to reason with those voices, to tell them: No, this is not the time for that. No matter how compelling the worries may be, you have to learn how to say No, No, No, we can't go there right now.

One of the best arguments, when you're worried about how things could get really bad, is to remind yourself that you don't really know exactly *how* things could get really bad, but you do know that, regardless, you're going to need mindfulness, alertness, concentration, and discernment to deal with whatever the situation is. Now, where are you going to get those qualities? You can get them only by developing them through the practice. This is what you're doing right now. Here is your opportunity to practice, so this is the best way to prepare for anything that's going to be difficult.

That's one example. You'll have to find in your own case what the best arguments are for all your different defilements.

This is a lot of what discernment is about. Sometimes people think that discernment is simply learning how not to think at all. You just watch arising and passing away and just let it arise and pass away, and that's it, but as long as there are any bits and pieces of misunderstanding hanging around in the mind, the mind is going to have its surreptitious ways of sneaking out again. So you have to look and see where the mind still has some mistaken ideas that would compel it to want to go after, say, sensual thinking or worries about this, worries about that. Then you learn how to cut those ideas short. Try to find some way to go straight for the jugular. The more you can find the heart of whatever the misunderstanding is, go straight for that, because you're trying to kill off your misunderstandings as quickly as possible so you can get back to work on your concentration as quickly as possible. That's how you deal with the distractions that come from

misunderstanding.

As for the ones that come from an imbalance in your energy, you have to deal with them by trying to bring the energy back into balance. Sometimes it's a physical energy. When the body is all wired and the mind is bouncing around like a ping pong ball, you've got to find someplace in the body where the energy is solid and still. It's there. The body has many layers of energy, many different types of energy, so look for the counteracting energy. Where is there a sense of stillness inside? It might be in your bones. Your bones are very still. They're not wired. So think about your bones, how they just sit there, solid and heavy. Try to breathe in a way that allows you to get in touch with that sense of heaviness, solidity, to anchor you. Focus as much as possible on that.

There are other times when the distractions are more due to a low level of energy. A lot of the distractions come because you're just too weak to keep things in mind. You've been working hard all day. The mind feels weak. The body feels weak, and thoughts are just wandering all over the place with no specific purpose. It's not that you feel a real need to think about these other things, it's just that your energy is so low that whatever comes popping up through the nervous system pops right into the mind and you don't have any defense against it. So you've got to find where your strength is.

Ajaan Lee talks about the energy that comes up the back of the spine. You might want to focus on that for a while, or just make up your mind you're going to focus on one little point in the body and just really stay right there and try to develop the quality of awareness that's like listening very intently for very subtle sounds. You don't hold anything back. You focus right in and stay right in, in, in, in, in. That way you gather whatever little energy you have and give it a charge. As you bring these energies together, they can begin to nourish one another. This is especially important when you find that the body is weak. When you're working with the breath and the body is still functioning, you find that there are different sources of energy in different parts of the body you can draw on.

Ajaan Lee also talks about being sensitive to outside energies. Different places have different kinds of energy. Different species of trees have different energies. In some of the places where you meditate, the energy is healthy and helpful; in other places, it's not so helpful. So you have to learn how to tune in to the levels of energy that are actually going to help you. If the energies from outside are not so helpful, you have to fill the body with your own energy to help keep them out.

But there will come times when you're really sick and there doesn't seem to be anything in the body that gives you any source of energy. That's where you've got to depend on the mind.

The Buddha enumerated five kinds of mental strength: conviction, persistence, mindfulness, concentration, and discernment. You've got to find your energy here, and the energy starts with your understanding, understanding that your actions matter. That's what conviction is all about, and that can make a difference. But there are some areas where your actions can't make a difference. That's where you have to drop any worries you might have.

The Buddha lists three things that people might be worried about as they're approaching death. They might be worried about their children, their family; or they might be worried about their parents; or they might be concerned about the pleasures they're going to have to leave. Here we are in the human realm with all its human pleasures. You start thinking about the fact that you won't sense these pleasures anymore: You won't see any beautiful sunsets, you won't see any rock canyons, you won't taste any delicious food—all the other pleasures you can think of. You have to put them aside, and one of the ways you can deal with that is to realize that there are better pleasures, on other levels of being, up in the heavens.

There's a sutta where the Buddha advises a person who's counseling someone who's dying to say, "Well, there are better pleasures than that." When you get the person focused on one level of heaven, you say, "Well, there are better pleasures than that." When the person is focused on the brahma worlds, you tell the person that even those brahma pleasures are inconstant. They're not going to last. Brahmas still have self-identity, which means they still suffer, even if it's only a subtle level. If the mind is really ready, it can actually let go at

that point.

As for the things you might be worried about, you have to remind yourself that there comes a point where you have to put everything down. You can't carry the world around, or as they say in Thailand, you can't hold up the sky forever. When you see that those things are beyond you, you have to realize, okay, you did what you could, that's as far as you can get with that particular issue, that particular responsibility. Maybe someone else will pick it up, but even if they don't pick it up, you can't worry about that anymore. Your worries aren't going to help the situation. You've developed the perfections that come from working at that task and what's left is the dregs.

As Ajaan Lee said, it's like squeezing juice out of a piece of fruit. You've got the juice, and what's left of the fruit after you've taken the juice is just dregs. The juice is the good quality of the mind that you've developed. Don't forget that. Hold onto that. And to whatever extent you're able to be mindful, to be alert, you just keep at it, keep at it, keep at it. Don't give up. Have the conviction that fires your persistence, that enables you to stay mindful and alert. And the continuity of mindfulness and alertness is what develops concentration. At the very least, you want to stay really focused. When you can start making distinctions—the pain that's coming in, the sense of weakness, the sense of being overwhelmed, whatever—just see that “whatever” as an object of the mind, whereas your awareness is something else.

This is where discernment comes in and starts seeing the distinctions. There's the awareness of the feeling, but then the feeling itself is something else. Stay with the awareness. This is a constant theme throughout the Wilderness Tradition. When Ajaan Maha Boowa gave those talks to the woman with cancer, that was one of the themes he repeated over and over again: Learn how to see the distinction between your awareness and the pain. In the talk we had from Ajaan Chah last night, that, again, was the message: The pain is one thing; the awareness is something else. Learn how to see that they really are distinct. They're already distinct, it's simply that we, in our ignorance, glom them together.

Now, this kind of discernment requires that you be really, really still, to see these distinctions. If the mind is running around, the distinctions are going to be blurred, but when you're really still you see that things actually do separate out that way, and the reason you didn't see that was because you were running past all the time.

So that's the energy of the mind. It's a focusing in, with the determination that you don't want to come back and suffer anymore. As for anything that pulls you away from that determination, that distracts you from that determination, you've got to learn how to drop it, drop it, drop it. All the stories, all the narratives that you tell yourself about who you are, what your responsibilities are, and what's going to happen in the world, what's going to happen to your family, your friends, all the projects that you take on: You need a spot in the mind where those things just don't matter, where the quality of your mind, the quality of your awareness does matter. So, you've got to stay focused. You've got to learn how to develop this quality of staying focused, of not letting yourself get distracted by whatever stories, or narratives, or sense of responsibility you may have, or fear that you're going to miss out on something. The really important things are right in here.

So, as we meditate, we're basically learning two things: the right way of understanding all this, and the right way of bringing your energy to bear, to develop this focus. When they talk about making the mind one, it's both a matter of the singleness of your focus and also of making the mind your first priority. This is the number one thing you need to work on, the number one thing of real value. I've always found it strange that people say that there's no essence to the Buddha's teachings; that the Buddha taught there is no such thing as essence. This comes from a modern academic prejudice against what they call essentialism. They like to see the Buddha as an early critic of essentialism, claiming that the Buddha denied the existence of any essence in you or in his teachings or in anything at all. But the Buddha never taught that. He said that there is one thing of essence, and that's release: the mind when it's totally free. That has true value, essential value.

So, when you're making your mind one, it's both to bring it all together and to make that sense of release its one object, its one priority. That's what this practice is all about.