

A Poker Mind

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When you settle down with the breath, you're trying to bring three things together: your sense of the body, the feeling of pleasure, and your awareness. Those are the first three frames of reference that the Buddha talks about in establishing mindfulness. The fourth frame of reference, *dhammas*, is basically lists of qualities and other things to watch out for, to adjust, to help bring those first three things together. They include a list of hindrances: Those are things you want to abandon. The factors for awakening are things you want to develop. The fetters with regard to the six senses are to be abandoned as well. The five clinging-aggregates are things to be comprehended. And then there are the four noble truths, which apply their duties to what you're doing right now. For instance, your main duty right now is to develop concentration because that's part of the path.

So in the beginning, we take these three things—body, feeling, mind—and we try to bring them together. At first they may not fit quite together, which is why we have to do a lot of directed thought and evaluation: figuring out what's wrong—what's wrong with the breath, what's wrong with the mind. And when the breath does get comfortable, the next question is what you can do to take that sense of ease and make it seep through the body. We want to end up with a sense of pleasure suffusing the body and your awareness suffusing the body, so they all become one. That's when you can really settle in.

You've got to maintain that sense of awareness-and-breath-and-pleasure until the pleasure starts feeling gross. Not gross in the sense of being disgusting, but just not subtle enough. You want something more subtle. Before the pleasure feels gross, you've got the rapture that starts feeling a bit too much. You let that die away. Then you let the pleasure die away, so you've just got breath, equanimity, and awareness. And then the in-and-out breathing will gradually stop.

There will still be breath energy in the body. In fact, it's the connectedness of the breath energy in the body that allows your in-and-out breathing to stop. You don't force it to stop. It's just that when everything is so well connected in the body, there's no felt need to breathe. Sometimes this will be startling when you suddenly realize you haven't been breathing for a while. But as you get more and more used to it, you realize that you don't need to. When the body needs to breathe, it'll breathe. You're not suppressing anything. You're just being very still and very balanced.

It's at this point where your sense of the "knower" comes to the fore. As the movement of the in-and-out breathing—which what defines your sense of the body—gets less and less and less, you're just left with a cloud of little sensation droplets. There's a vague sense of that cloud as having a body shape, but it's not very well defined. As Ajaan Fuang would advise his students, you have to wait to that point before you really start thinking about just being with the sense of knowing on its own. Prior to that point, you can have a sense of the knower, of what's simply aware of things, but it's not going to be stable.

As you go through all the beginning steps of concentration, you're trying to get a perception that you can hold onto. At first, there will be gaps in the perception. But as long as there's something obvious that you can focus on to sustain the perception, you can paper over the gaps. For example, you've got your breath as your main object. You're thinking about the breath and if the perception happens to lapse for a bit, the breath is still there coming in, going out. So you apply the perception again. It's what keeps you there. The two help each other along.

But if you're going to focus on the knower at that point, you don't have anything to focus on but the perception itself. When there's a gap in the perception, the focal point is gone. So you need practice in learning how to make your perceptions more and more continuous. This is what mindfulness is for. It stitches these perceptions together, so that you get to the point where the perceptions are constant regardless of whether the breath is going to be there or not. That's when you can let the breath go.

But it's not the case that you don't try to develop a sense of the observer as something separate from early on, simply that it's not going to be as prominent. It's not going to be as obvious. As stable. And it's not going to hit home in the same way. Only when the mind has settled down to the point where the breath has stopped and your sense of the body is beginning to dissolve and you've just got the awareness left, will it really hit you. There will come a realization at some point that *this* is my awareness.

We're not talking about something faraway that's in a Dhamma book someplace. It's right here and it's very clear and very obvious. It's like tuning into a radio station. In the beginning, there will be some static because you haven't tuned quite precisely. But then when you're well tuned and the radio is locked into the signal, then there's no more static.

But you don't have to wait until that point to get at least some use out of this idea of the "knower." It starts very early on, as when the Buddha talks about dealing with unpleasant words from other people. If someone says something nasty, just remind yourself an unpleasant sound has made contact at the ear, and

see if you can leave it at that. You don't stitch it into stories about who the person is or how bad their intentions are or how much you feel hurt by their words or whatever. There's just the contact at the ear and then you drop it. You're observing what's there, but you're training yourself not to add anything more to what's there. That's the role of this observer.

You can try to learn to do that with painful feelings as well. The feeling is there, but can you allow it to be there without a lot of commentary, a lot of complaints? Can there be just the sensation without any thought about how long this sensation has been there or how much longer it's going to be here? You're not dragging yourself down. So just note: "There it is." Note that this sense of the knower will waver because it doesn't yet have the same solidity as it would if you were coming out of strong states of concentration. But it's helpful to keep in mind that this is something to aspire to.

It's like having a good poker face. Whatever comes up, you're not phased and you don't show any signs of being phased. Call it a poker mind: Whatever comes up, you figure it's all equal. Part of your mind may say, "No, it's not equal at all," but for the time being you can borrow some of the Buddha's discernment. This is what the strength of or the treasure of learning is. We're borrowing the Buddha's discernment to help us when we can't create discernment of our own.

Part of this lies in learning how to see feelings of pleasure and pain, as they come in, as being equal, as having equal value, so that the mind doesn't get turned by these things. What you're doing is developing patience and endurance, together with equanimity, and learning how to apply them in areas where you hadn't applied them before. You're also learning how to talk yourself into seeing these qualities as good things to have. Part of the mind may complain that you're being impassive, dull, not standing up for your rights, not defending yourself, whatever. But you have to learn how to say No to those voices. Learning how to be just with what's there and to let it go as it passes away: It's a skill you're going to need how to develop. So you work at it outside of the meditation, too.

When I was staying with Ajaan Fuang, he would test me to see if my concentration was getting better. He would say things that he knew would usually get me upset. And in the beginning, I didn't realize what was happening and I'd get upset. But then I realized, "Oh, he's testing me to see how well I can maintain a sense of being impassive and solid in the face of whatever." And the advantage of that is that you learn how to not get phased by criticism, especially from the people you respect. This doesn't mean that you brush it off, but simply that you don't react emotionally. That allows you to look at the criticism to see exactly where it's right: "How can I benefit from the criticism?" And then you can

develop that attitude that Ajaan Lee talks about, where you can take anything that the world throws at you and see that it's got its good side as well as its bad. No matter how good it may seem in terms of the world, it has its bad side. Wealth, fame, praise: Those things you've got to watch out for. At the same time, the things that the world says are bad have their good side as well. Material loss, loss of status, criticism. You learn from criticism. You learn from all these things. But you learn best when you're not reacting, when you can develop this sense of just knowing that it's there. You're not getting carried away by all the embroidery that we tend to add to these things.

So bring that attitude to your meditation. It helps a lot. To begin with, when things aren't going well, you're not getting upset. You say, "Well, this is a job that's going to take some time. I've been following my defilements for a long time. I've been following my cravings. They've been leading me around by the nose for who knows how long." It's going to take a while to undo those habits. Then, as things start going well, make sure you don't get excited. All too often, it happens that the mind finally settles down, it feels really good, you get excited—and you've lost it. Some people will say, "Well, it's because I've been trying too hard or I like it too much." It's not that you like it too much. It's what you want. It's just that you have to learn how to not be so reactive. Say: "Oh. There's that. Oh. There's that." If you get excited about a little bit of concentration, just think of what would happen if something even better than that came along. You'd get really excited and lose that too. So one of the skills you have to develop as better and better things develop in the meditation is to say, "Oh. There's this," and hold the mind in check so that you can observe what happens after "this." And you learn how to observe it better.

This is what the Buddha told Rahula—to make his mind like earth—from the very beginning. Whatever gets poured on the earth, the earth doesn't react. You want to have that same quality of solid non-reactivity. That's what's meant by being with the the observer, being with the knower. It is a construct you've constructed out of your perceptions—it's not the awakened mind or anything—but it's something you want to develop as one of the fruits of your concentration, so that whatever happens, you have this place to resort to.

Then it becomes a good basis for your discernment, because your discernment is going to be seeing connections between causes and effects, and sometimes you'll be seeing connections you don't like at all. In other words, you see something really stupid you're doing and you should have known better. Now you realize, it's not necessary and it is stupid. And if you don't get upset by that fact, then you can let it go.

Ultimately, there is another kind of consciousness that lies on the other side of concentration, that comes as a result of the discernment. That's something else entirely. This is a point that so often gets confused. People think you get this sense of just the knower or just to "be the knowing" and that somehow you've reached the unconditioned. It's still very, very conditioned, because you've got a name for it and you can stay with it only as long as you stick with the name: the perception you apply to it.

There was a Western monk who asked Ajaan Chah about this one time. Everybody there the monastery was assuming that the knower and the awakened awareness were the same thing. So this monk, who liked to ask questions, asked Ajaan Chah point blank, and Ajaan Chah said, "No, of course not. They're two very different things."

So it's important to keep that distinction in mind, and to develop this sense of the knower as one of your skills as a meditator, so that you can maintain a poker mind. You can be impassive and watch things clearly for what they are. And then watch clearly as things move from one step to the next step in the mind. This requires that you not get excited by the first step and miss all the ones that come after.

So try to make this knower like earth, in the sense that it's non-reactive. You can make it like space, in the sense that anything can go through it without disturbing it. Yet at the same time, you're not dull and unperceptive like a clod of earth, and you're not spacy. You're very perceptive but unmoved by things. Only then you can really see things for what they are and how they act, to the point where you can work your way past them.