

Values

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When you focus on the breath and try to stay focused on the breath, it's partly a matter of technique and partly a matter of your values. The technique can be explained in just a few pages—Ajaan Lee's seven steps take just two or three pages. And they cover a lot of the territory in the technique: focusing on the breath, finding a spot in the body where you can stay centered, and then working from there to let the breath energy feel good throughout the body, so that it's all connected together, noticing what kind of breathing then can maintain a sense of connectedness and comfort in the body. That's pretty much the technique.

But there's also the question of values—why you're meditating. And sometimes you can see your sense of values influencing the technique. If you come with the idea that you want to gain a vision, you'll find yourself pushing the technique in the direction of a vision. If you want to clamp down and have no awareness of your body at all, you can do that. You can push the technique in that direction as well.

So it's important to understand that as we're developing concentration, the important element is balance: a sense of ease, comfort, well-being inside. It's not as flashy or as extreme as we sometimes want to go in the meditation. But it's got a lot more value. Value for what? Value in that it allows you to observe the mind, to understand what drives the mind, and particularly what drives the mind to create suffering. We all want pleasure. We all want happiness. Yet we find ourselves doing things that lead to unhappiness. And even though we may know better, we tend to persist with our old bad habits.

This is where our values come in. Understanding why it's important to focus on training the mind, why it's important to have this sense of centered well-being: This comes in with the element of right effort called generating desire. You have to make yourself *want* to do this in order to do it well. And there are times when it's easy to want it. You find that things click. Everything falls into place. It feels really good being with the breath, really good being centered right here. You can't imagine why you would ever leave. But then you find yourself leaving, even when things are going well—which means you have to dig deeper to find out why.

As for when things are not going well, that's when your sense of values has to kick in, to understand why you stick with this even when you leave the monastery and go back home. Why would you want to stay with the breath as you're dealing with other people, dealing with your work? Or even if you're staying here, there are times when you find it hard to stick with the practice. This is where it's good to remind yourself: Exactly what is this all about?

That chant we had just now on the nature of the world—basically it's undependable, inconstant, stressful, not self. And what people do is so much driven by their craving. Now, part of the mind says, So what? That's the part of the mind you've got to look into. What does it want to do? Why does it want to stay a slave to craving? We all know about aging, illness, and death. The passage we chanted just now draws the parallels between aging and inconstancy, stress

and illness, not-self and death. These things go together. And they can't be denied. That's the way the world is.

But part of the mind says, "Well, I want to do this or that in spite of all that. This training of the mind is getting in the way." And one of the questions you can ask in response is, "How much more do you want to suffer? Do you really love yourself?" If you really love yourself, you try to figure out how to find a happiness you can depend on. But then the mind will say, "Well, I'll wait for that later. There are some other things I want to do in the meantime." This is where the quality of heedfulness comes in, realizing there may not *be* a later. You may not have that chance any time soon to come back to the practice. And your willingness to see what your true best interests are—that's a lot of the wisdom of the practice.

A while back I was reading a history of the 19th century that discussed one of the favorite types of literature back in those days: biographies of great people. People really enjoyed reading lives of great people. The typical story was that someone started out with a lot of handicaps and yet was able to make his way up. Most of the stories were about "him," men. But the novels of the time were also filled with women who were willing to make sacrifices for the sake of a greater happiness. Then some time in the 20th century, the taste changed. We liked our antiheroes: the people who saw through the sham of trying to make yourself something better than what you currently are. We're now more concerned about the honesty of people admitting their true feelings right now. Rather than trying to make themselves into something, they just want to stay where they are and explore where they are. And the honesty of that approach is presented as an ideal.

Now they did see through a lot of the sham in the Victorian era, but they really misunderstood what it means to be true to yourself. It doesn't mean that you just stay the way you are, or accept the way you are. It means that you really look at yourself and see what potentials you have. Where is the potential for suffering in your life? Where is the potential for happiness in your life? And maybe that is a noble quest: to find a true happiness, to develop all the good qualities of mind that at the moment you have only in a rudimentary form, or potential form, to try to actualize them. In other words, it's not a matter of pretending to be something that you aren't, but simply realizing that you do have a potential to make something more of yourself.

One way of helping that process is to get yourself out of your individual narratives and go look at the larger shape of things. This may be one of the reasons why, on the night of his awakening, the Buddha started out with that knowledge of his past lives. But then from there, he didn't go straight into the present moment. He inclined his mind to that second knowledge as well, seeing all beings throughout the universe die and then be reborn in line with their karma. It was in seeing the larger picture that he also saw the larger pattern. The way our lives go is dependent on our actions. Where do our actions come from? They come from our views and our intentions, the two acting together. So he realized that that was the area where his mind really needed to be trained, in terms of how he looked at things, and how he aimed his actions, his motivations, his purposes in acting, speaking, thinking.

Once he saw the larger picture, it was a lot easier get into the present

moment and to stay there, to focus on the right things in the present moment. Where is the potential for greater understanding in the present moment? He said it was looking at the question of suffering. Where is there suffering right now? What's creating it? What can you do to put an end to it? His willingness to look at the world at large was what got him focused properly and kept him going on the path.

The same with that passage we chanted just now from the *Ratthapala Sutta*. It was Ratthapala's reason for ordaining. Notice he didn't say, "I am subject to aging, illness, and death." He said, "This is the way the world is, the world as a whole." You go out and look at it. It's swept away. It does not endure. It offers no shelter. There is no one in charge. It has nothing of its own. It's a slave to craving. That's the way things are everywhere.

Again and again, the Buddha points this out as an important part of growing up and developing a more mature attitude, a more mature set of values: looking at the world as a whole. Where is it going? We have that chant frequently: "I am subject to aging, illness, death, and separation. I am the heir to my actions." That's part of a sutta where the Buddha goes on to say that you should also reflect that it's not just you. Everybody, no matter where you go, no matter what kind of life you live: All people are subject to aging, illness, and death. Everybody is subject to separation. Everybody is the heir to his or her actions. And that principle of action is what provides the escape.

So what this means is that, as we're meditating, we're not pretending to be somebody we aren't. We meditate because we love ourselves. We have compassion for ourselves. We realize that making some sacrifices now will lead to good results down the line, the results we want. A part of this is taken on faith. We hear about the Deathless. We hear about Nirvana. And sometimes it sounds like a story, a fairytale or, as one person said, an archetype. And we have to take it on trust that this is an actuality. Ajaan Maha Boowa was saying that if he could bring Nirvana out and show it to everybody, everybody would want it. No questions asked. We take that on faith. But then we look around us. What is life like without that possibility? It's a pretty depressing prospect.

When Ratthapala decided to ordain, it wasn't because he just stopped with, "The world is a slave to craving," as if that were the end of everything. That's the way things were, but he was also looking for another possibility, a way out. It's because we value the possibility of freedom, that possibility of a true happiness: That's why we make the sacrifices we do. It may be something as simple as dealing with a difficult person, and realizing that you should stay with your breath first, rather than getting absorbed in the drama. Or dealing with the desire to indulge yourself. There's a modern tendency to believe that by indulging ourselves, we show our love for ourselves. Well, in some sense, the Victorians had it right. If you really love yourself, you want to make something more out of yourself than you are at the moment, which may mean making sacrifices. It's learning how to make the sacrifice in a way that's intelligent. You're not denying the existence of your other urges. You're fully aware that you've got these other desires, these other tendencies, these other cravings. But you also realize that no matter how real they are, they're not your true friends. Either you have to do battle with them or you have to convert them.

So this is what heedfulness teaches us. That's one of the main motivations the

Buddha gives for generating desire to stay on the path. The other, interestingly enough, is a sense of pride: "I've come this far. I've learned this much about the Dharma. It would be a shame if I dropped it." So pride has its uses on the path as well. Only it's not the false pride of pretending to be someone you're not. It's the pride of someone who doesn't want to be a traitor to him or herself; of someone who wants to be able to look in the mirror every morning and say, "I'm doing my best." There's that question asked in one of the passages: "Days and nights fly past, fly past. What am I becoming right now?" Hopefully not -just becoming an older person. Hopefully doing something with this in-and-out breath to gain some deeper understanding as to why there is suffering, and what can be done to stop it. And realizing that finding an answer to that question is one of the most important things you can do.

In the process of developing the path, we're going to be developing skillful qualities, learning how to abandon the things that get in the way of knowledge and to encourage qualities like mindfulness and alertness that strengthen your knowledge, strengthen your awareness, strengthen your insight and discernment.

These things, like the defilements, are not part of the nature of the mind. Ajaan Lee has a good passage where he points out that the mind is neither good nor evil, but it's what *knows* good and evil, and it's what *does* good and evil, and ultimately it's what *lets go* of good and evil. That luminosity of the mind is neither good nor evil, but it does allow you to know. It creates the circumstances in which skillful qualities can be brought into being, in which they can do their work to bring the mind to a place where it goes beyond both the good and the evil, beyond that luminosity.

Which means that the path is not inevitable. A brahman once asked the Buddha, "Is everybody going to gain awakening?" And he refused to answer. Ven. Ananda was afraid that the brahman would go away misunderstanding, thinking that the Buddha was stymied by the question, and so he took the brahman aside and said, "Suppose there was a fortress with a wise gatekeeper and only one gate into the fortress. The gatekeeper would walk around the walls of the fortress and wouldn't see any other means of entry into the fortress, not even a hole big enough for cat to slip through. He wouldn't know how many people would eventually come into the fortress, but he would know that everybody who was going to come in and out of the fortress had to come in and out through the gate." In the same way, Ananda said, the Buddha realized that whoever was going to gain awakening would have to come through the path of the noble eightfold path, the seven factors for awakening, and the different sets in the wings to awakening. As for how many people would follow that path, that wasn't his concern.

So it's not inevitable that we're going to gain awakening. In other words, we don't have an awakened nature that forces us to gain awakening at some point. What we do have is a desire for happiness, and a luminous mind that can know. It's capable of knowing that there is suffering and it's capable of watching, developing the qualities that allow you to see where the suffering comes from, and to see that it's not necessary, that you can put an end to it.

This is important—because sometimes when people gain a luminous state of mind, or a wide-open state of mind, they think they've hit their awakened nature. But the luminosity is not part of awakening. It's a condition that allows the mind

to see, but the awakening comes from our determination not to keep on suffering. That was Ajaan Mun's last message to his students: You're a warrior doing battle with defilement, with discernment as your prime weapon. And what in the mind is the warrior? The determination not to come back and be the laughingstock of the defilements; the determination not to suffer again. Don't let go of that determination, he said, until it has done its job.

So there's a necessary element of willing in the path. Without that willing, it just doesn't happen. The luminosity of the mind is what allows the will to do its work, allows us to straighten out our own minds, to train our own minds. We don't have to go around hoping for some outside power to come and save us. We've got our ability here to see the connection between suffering and its cause, and to find the path to the cessation of suffering, with which you can let go of the defilements. When there are no more defilements, you can let go of the path, which is composed just of activities, because you've found something that's not an activity, something that's not fabricated. That's what we're working on.

But you can't clone the unfabricated. You've got to do the work. You've got to develop the factors that give rise to clarity of mind, clarity of vision that can push away those clouds of defilement. When you get the causes right, the effects will take care of themselves.

So try to be very clear about what you're doing, because that's a huge area where ignorance lies: around what we're doing and the results of what we're doing. We tend to be very willful about not wanting to admit to ourselves what we're doing or what our intentions are. We also tend to be very willful about not wanting to see the unfortunate effects of some of our actions. This is why the Buddha, when he was giving instructions to his son, focused on just this issue, telling him, "Look at what you're going to do, look at what you're doing, and look at what you've done. Try to be very clear about the results of your actions." That reflection is how you begin to see through the clouds of delusion that otherwise keep moving in, moving in, moving in all the time. When you can see through your delusion, you realize that it doesn't have to be there all the time.

This principle is what allows us to practice. This principle is what gives us hope, confidence, that there is an end to suffering. If you act on it, there will come a day when it's not just a hope or confidence; it's actual knowledge that there is a deathless and it's totally free from suffering of every kind.