

Being Still

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Notice just now when we finished chanting, the sound of the crickets was suddenly a lot louder. It's not that the crickets suddenly sang louder, but for us it seemed louder because we were quieter.

This is an important principle in training the mind: The quieter you are, the more you see. We talk often about how there's a *doing*, there's a *karma* in every present moment. There are choices you make with every present moment, and sometimes the emphasis may seem too much on the doing. But remember that being quiet is also a form of doing, and sometimes it's the most skillful doing, the most skillful thing you can do.

Try to keep the mind as quiet as possible, as still as possible, as if you're listening to music far, far away and you want to try to make out the tones, make out the melody. You have to make yourself very quiet. And in the same way if you want to see things in the mind, see things in the breath, you have to make yourself very quiet. The quieter the mind is the more it sees.

So, when the breath comes in, the breath goes out, the mind doesn't have to come in and out with the breath. You choose a spot in the body where you want to stay, and you stay right there. Ajaan Lee gives the image of a post at the edge of the sea. The tide comes in, the tide goes out, waves come in, waves go out, but the post doesn't come in and out with the tide or the waves. It stays right where it was, where it's been all along, and because it stays put you can tell exactly how high and low the tides are, how far the waves come in.

The more still you are the more you have something to measure things against. It's like those measuring things they have next to the – I don't know what they call them – to tell what the flood level is. Those things have to stay in place. If they don't stay in place they're totally useless. Or you can make another comparison with equipment you use in a scientific experiment. If the equipment is placed on a table that wobbles, or if an earthquake happens and knocks everything to the floor, the measurements that come out of that equipment are worthless. You have to throw them away.

So it is with the mind. When the mind is moving around like that you can't really see things for what they are. You simply go along with the flow, but how fast or how slow the flow is, you don't know.

So, when we sit here and meditate try to find a spot that's comfortable and then just stay right there. You don't have to do a lot of things. Just do one thing

consistently. And this way you have some way of measuring the breath, the ins and outs of the breath, you have a way of also measuring the movements of the mind. Once you have that reference point then even the most subtle movements become clear. But if you move around a lot you have no idea whether other things are still or moving around as well. So find a nice quiet spot to stay and then just stay there as comfortably and still as possible. And watch. Keep your mindfulness alert.

Think of it as like throwing a pot on a potter's wheel. You put the clay on the wheel and the wheel turns around. And you've got to make your mind as still as possible, you have to make your gaze as still as possible as you move your hands up along the clay to shape the pot. If you glance around, if your mind moves around, the pot is destroyed. Your hands suddenly lose their balance and go off in one direction or another.

The difficulty of course is that the mind's not used to staying. It's used to running around. And if it wants to run around, there is that role for it in the meditation: You can move it through the body if you like. Remind yourself that the mind has lots of choices. There's no one right way to meditate all the time. You have to be sensitive to what's going on. Sometimes the emphasis has to be on the stillness. Other times it has to be on the reflection, the contemplation, on comparing things. But always remember that you have this range of choices.

So many times we get stuck in a particular way, a type of behavior because we forget the choices that are available to us. And then we miss things. It's like deer in the winter. When the snow falls again and again and again, the deer tend to follow the same path through the woods and halfway through the winter you find that if you go along that path the bark on either side of that path has been stripped clear off the trees. And they say that if it's a long winter and the deer strip all the bark off the trees next to the path and there's no more bark right there, they'll die, even though there's plenty of bark in the rest of the forest. But they stay in that particular path, they don't wander off. And with so many of us that's the way it is with our minds. We have certain types, ways of behavior, certain patterns of behavior, and we just stay right there. We forget the other alternatives available to us.

So when you find that your mind is too busy in the meditation trying to figure things out remind yourself that you also have the alternative of being very still. If you find that being still gets too boring, remind yourself that you do have the other alternative of moving around, but you test it for a while and see if it's the right alternative. Maybe being still was the right thing to do, and it's simply that you were getting impatient. In that case you turn on your impatience. Say, "Who is this that I have to listen to?" Of course when you track down the impatience, when you track down that voice that was complaining in your mind,

you realize that there was nothing behind it. It's just a role that the mind takes on. But you don't necessarily have to believe it because there's not necessarily anybody there.

The important thing is that you realize you have this range of choices as you meditate, and as you get better at the meditation you get a better sense of what is the appropriate time for being still and what is the appropriate time for contemplating and questioning things and trying to figure them out. One easy test is that if you're trying to figure things out and, instead of getting clearer they get more and more complex, more blurry, that's the time to be still again. Just sit for a while, and be very, very still - to watch. And then after a while you get a sense of when the mind has had enough stillness.

In the beginning stages of the practice, a good rule of thumb is that you want to be as still as much as you can because it's the stillness that gives you the perspective. Don't be in too great a hurry to gain insight. Don't be in too great a hurry to figure things out, because the real sensitivity that's going to open up new channels of possibilities in your mind has to come from these points of being very, very still.

So even though part of your mind may start telling you, "This is stupid. This is crazy. You're not learning anything. You're just sitting still, still, still. What are you going to learn from that?" Remind yourself that you learn perspective, you learn sensitivity. You're putting yourself in a good position to see things.

And just as a hunter can't control when the game is going to come past, you can't control when the opportunities for insight are going to come, but you can position yourself in the right place: right here at the breath, very still, very calm, very watchful. Because when real insights come, there's both the stillness and the alertness, the contemplation. They come together in points like that.

And because for most of us the stillness is the hardest thing to learn, that's what we've got to emphasize the most.