

## *Urgency & Contentment*

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I once visited a patient in a hospital in Bangkok. He was the husband of one of Ajaan Fuang students. His wife meditated, but he didn't. And now he was dying of cancer. There wasn't much in the room. There was a bed and a bedstand. It was a good hospital, but there was a TV blaring in the corner. Watching TV had been one of his very typical ways of dealing with boredom or depression, but at that point, it wasn't doing him any good at all. It was actually more of a nuisance than anything else.

Seeing someone in a situation like that makes you stop and think: What if you're stuck in that situation some day? What are you going to do? The various ways you've dealt with pain or boredom or the difficult issues in life: How many of them will you be able to take into that hospital room with you? And what about the medicines for dealing with pain? What happens when the medicine doesn't work because you used it so much that the body stops responding to it? What if the government suddenly gets really insane, and you find yourself thrown into a prison, and they decide they want to torture you to get information out of you? How are you going to keep your sanity?

When you think about things like this, you realize how important meditation is. It's a skill that doesn't use very many raw materials. It's based on something you take with you wherever you go: your breath. Whatever skills you can develop based on the breath are going to be at hand at all times. That's why it's so worthwhile to spend a lot of time with the breath, and not go hedging your bets.

We often think of the Dhamma as something you read or listen to, but it's actually a skill. On the one hand, dhammas are qualities of mind, and on the other, there's the Dhamma of practice, which is a set of skills that you develop. You want to take the Dhamma with you if you ever find yourself in prison or in hospital. Wherever you may end up or wherever you may pass through, you want to take along the Dhamma as qualities of mind, as a set of skills.

It's good to think about this when you find yourself tempted to go thinking about other things, wandering off away from the breath: There are skills you need to master. And there's only one way of mastering them: by basing them on the breath.

You can think about this in two ways. One is in the way I just mentioned, basically realizing that someday you're going to be cornered. You're not going to have many things with you. But if you do have the skills you've developed with the

breath, they'll be your support and refuge. That gives you a sense of the importance, of the urgency in working with the breath.

Another way of approaching this issue is from the point of view of realizing that everything you really need for happiness, for peace of mind, for liberation, is all centered right here at the breath. All the information you have to learn and understand, all the fabrications you want to master, are right here at the breath. When you're focused on the breath, thinking about the breath, and evaluating the breath, the thinking and evaluation are called verbal fabrication. The breath itself is bodily fabrication. The perceptions and feelings that you develop working with the breath: Those are mental fabrications. Everything you need to understand for the sake of awakening is right here.

So think about this in a way that gives you a sense of contentment, content with being with the breath, that everything you need to understand about the Dhamma is something you'll be able to see from the point of view of staying with the breath, so you don't have to go wandering outside. You don't have to second-guess the different thoughts that come floating into your mind, wondering if maybe this is something valuable or that's going to be a great insight or whatever. Just content yourself with staying right here. You don't have a hankering to go off someplace else.

So these are two ways of thinking to keep you focused on the breath. Compare one to the carrot, the other to the stick. Developing a sense of contentment and comfort, a sense of really liking to be with the breath, getting on familiar terms with it, being friends with the breath: That's the carrot. The sense of urgency is the stick. And although most of the time we prefer carrots to sticks, it's good to have that stick ready for when you need it.

They say that people who've really mastered skills have a very strong sense of the value of the skill. This comes from both of these dimensions: realizing the good that comes when you've mastered the skill and the dangers that face you if you don't. So as a good meditator, you have to learn to apply both types of thinking, and *when* to apply both. When your mind is feeling really anxious, try to work on the sense of contentment. When you're getting lazy, try to develop the sense of urgency. You can learn from both.

When you're content to be with the breath, it means you can look right at the breath and see the potentials there, because you're not wandering off other places. This gives you a chance to wander around the world of the breath, to explore all of its ins and outs, and to develop a sense of being at home here. The more you can feel at home with the breath—with a sense of ease, a sense of comfort, feeling

secure with the breath—the easier it is to stay with the breath for long periods of time. And the longer you stay with it, the more you see.

But if you find yourself just lolling around the house, watching the TV, raiding the refrigerator, it's good to peek outside and realize that there are storms outside. All kinds of dangers face the mind. Remember: You're born with a body. That body is open to all kinds of things happening to it. What are you going to do if you suddenly find your body in a really bad situation? You've got this mind. And again, lots of things can happen to you. As long as there's attachment, the mind is leaving itself open to all kinds of suffering. So the skills you develop with the breath to cut through that attachment are very important, because we have this house not just for relaxing. It's also a place where we can work in comfort—this house of the breath, this home for the mind.

So learn to read your mind. When it needs the encouragement that comes from reflecting on dangers, okay, apply the encouragement. Develop that sense of urgency. When it's feeling frazzled or discouraged, work on the sense of contentment: that you're on a good path, you're in a good home, a good place to be. That way, you find you can learn both from the contentment and from the urgency. They both spur you on to develop the skills you really need.