

Samvega & Pasada

October 4, 2007

Focusing on the breath, trying to get the mind to stay with the breath, can sometimes be a very chastening experience.

On the first level, there's the simple difficulty of getting the mind to stay with one thing: something as simple and nearby as the breath, and yet you find it slipping off, slipping off, slipping off. You start out with the best of intentions: You're going to stay for the whole hour, or if you found that aiming at the whole hour seems too much, you say, "Okay, for five minutes I'm going to stay right here." Two seconds later you're off someplace else. And this, even if you've been meditating for a long time.

So your first lesson is simply how much the mind can deceive itself. Something else seems to slip in, pull a burlap sack pulled over your head, and you're off someplace else when you come out of the sack.

But even though this is chastening, don't let it get discouraging. It simply means that you've got to be more watchful over your own mind. Your mind can play tricks on you. And exactly who this mind is that's playing tricks and who you are who's being tricked: Put that question aside for the time being. Just learn how to identify with your intention to stay right here.

In one of Ajaan Mun's final Dhamma talks, reported by Ajaan Maha Boowa, Ajaan Mun is quoted as saying that this is one thing you never let go of: your determination to get past suffering. There'll be all kinds of other difficulties, other things you've got to let go of, but hold on to this until it's taken you there. Then you let go.

So, identify with this determination: You're going to stay here with the breath and then see what else comes up. Whatever else it is, remind yourself, "No, we're not going to go there."

Then you look for the warning signs. What are the signs of a mind that's about to slip off? When you seem to be with the breath but you're getting bored, part of the mind says, "Well, there must be something else around here." How does the mind do that? And then how does it pretend to itself that it's not doing that?

Look for that. Be aware that it's happening. And as soon as you sense that it's happening, remind yourself, "Hey, there's plenty to gain interest in here with the breath."

This is one of the reasons why I stuck with Ajaan Lee's method, because it's not just simply, in, out, in, out, in, out, three thousand times. You watch how the

breath comes in: Where do you feel it? What different ways do you feel it? Where does it feel good in the body? Where does it feel harsh? What ways of breathing build up tension, say, in the neck, in the back, in the shoulders? What ways of breathing can release that tension?

In other words, regard the breath as something to explore. You've got this breath energy here that's keeping you alive. And it only stands to reason that this basic force of life, if it feels comfortable and nourishing, is going to be better for you than if it feels strained and tense and disagreeable. Which means, of course, that you've got to learn how to pay more attention to it.

If you can make it interesting, it gets easier and easier to stay. The part of your mind that's looking for entertainment or at least looking for something new, something to learn about things: You can focus it here. There's a lot to learn about this breath energy in the body.

Ajaan Lee sometimes talks about six different kinds of breath energy in the body. The Buddha mentions different aspects of the wind element in the body: There's the up-flowing breath, which Ajaan Lee interprets as a sense of energy that's constantly flowing up from the feet up to the head. Then there's a down-flowing breath, which he says is one that goes from the head down to the feet and out. There's the wind in the intestines, the wind in the stomach, the sense of energy that flows throughout the whole body, and there's the in-and-out breath. They're all connected in different ways, and you can explore that.

So when we're talking about breath, it's not just the air coming in and out of the lungs, it's the whole feeling of energy you have in and around the body. When you close your eyes, how do you feel the energy in your body? What different types of energy are there? Some energy stays very still, other energy seems to spin around in place, some of it moves back and forth. There's lots to explore here.

This is where the experience of being with the breath can be chastening for another reason, because once you settle in here, you realize how you've ignored this whole area of your awareness and you begin to see the potential for well-being right here that you've overlooked. That's a chastening thought.

Then you can use your sensitivity to the breath as a foundation to look at other ways you pursue pleasure in your life: through relationships, through sensual pleasures, through the desire to gain this, to get that, become this, become that. You realize that you can get a lot of the sense of well-being you were searching for in those other ways simply by sitting here breathing. Then you can turn and look at your other forms of pleasure: pleasure based on greed, pleasure based on aversion, pleasure based on delusion. That can be very chastening as well.

There's a word in Pali, *samvega*, which is very difficult to translate into English.

Part of it is a sense of dismay: looking at your life realizing, “I’ve been spending a lot of time pursuing mirages.” And not only that, but also causing harm to yourself and other people in the process. There’s a sense of dismay. You feel chastened.

At the same time, there’s a sense of urgency that goes along with it, realizing that you’re trapped in this selfish and blind pursuit and you want to find a way out. Quickly. So sometimes *samvega* is translated as urgency. It’s a combination of all these things.

When we read about the Buddha’s life story, this is the feeling he had after seeing the old person, the sick person, and the dead person for the very first time: realizing that all the pleasures he’d been pursuing ended right there. This is where they lead you. You can imagine the sense of anguish and even terror that he felt. That’s the popular version of the story.

The version in the Canon is a little bit more believable. It’s not the case that he had never seen an old person or a sick person or a dead person in his life. He’d seen them many times, but like most of us, he just accepted these things as normal. Until one day it really hit him: This is where he was going to end up. All of the pleasures he had been pursuing were going to grind to a halt right there. Everything was going to fall apart right there.

The question arose in his mind, “Is there some other way out? Is there a pleasure, is there a happiness that doesn’t have to end with these things?” That’s when he saw the forest wanderer. He said, “Well, if there *is* a way out, it can be found through this”: going off into the wilderness, being alone, looking inside the mind to see what other potentials for happiness lie in there. Because the pleasures of the senses reach their limit right here.

It hit me the other day, I was planning the design for another book cover. And the thought suddenly struck me, someday I’m going to get so old, my eyes are going to be so bad, that I won’t be able to see these things anymore. I’ll get to the point where I’m not going to be able to hear the Dhamma anymore.

So even the pleasures that come out of artistic activity, your own creations: They’re not going to be around for you all the time. And you’re not going to be able to appreciate them all the time. The question is, “What have you got left?” You really have to look into the mind.

That was the young prince’s insight. And then the feeling he felt at that point, *pasada*, was a sense of confidence, clarity: “This must be the way out.”

This combination of *samvega* and *pasada* fires your practice, but at the same time keeps it from getting discouraged. There is a way out, and we’ve got the rest of the Buddha’s story to remind us that, yes, he did find the way out. And it’s

something based on qualities that we all have within us potentially.

As he said, it was because he was heedful, ardent, and resolute. Heedful relates to that sense of *samvega*: realizing that there are dangers in life. But heedfulness goes further, building on the realization that your actions do make a difference. If you're careful about what you do, you can protect yourself.

If we were all doomed, then it wouldn't matter how heedful we were. If life were like a big flow of lava that came and crushed everything in its path no matter what, regardless of what we did, then heedfulness wouldn't matter. But the fact that there is a way out and it's based on our own actions: That's why we have to be heedful.

Being ardent and resolute means that once you've made up your mind to stick with this path, you really do it, no matter what. You use all your ingenuity: When you run up against obstacles, you sit there and watch them for a while and figure out, "Okay, what's the obstacle here and what's the way around it?"

They've done psychological studies of people who are extremely skillful in different fields, and they've found that it starts with having a strong sense of the danger and drawbacks that can come if you aren't skillful.

There's the story of one of the best brain surgeons in America, who realized that he had a weak point in his surgical technique, which was dealing with aneurysms. So he practiced every day, day after day after day for months, inducing little aneurysms in little rats and then operating on them—realizing that if you were very careless operating on an aneurysm, you could kill somebody, or if you didn't kill them they'd be paralyzed. So sensing that danger, he worked on this skill again and again and again until he had mastered it.

The other side of ardency and resolution though, they discovered, is having a strong sense of the rewards that come when you really do things well—and taking joy in overcoming obstacles. This is what keeps the path from becoming dry and keeps the effort from being a chore and drudgery.

Try to develop the attitude that if there's an obstacle, you'll be able to handle it. And try to find joy in figuring out different ways of approaching it, different ways of getting around the obstacle. In other words, try to find a way in which the practice can capture your imagination.

In this case, think about the possibilities of the breath. We in the West don't often think about the breath energy in the body. We've heard about *ch'i*, we've heard about *prana*, but our culture hasn't really cultivated that aspect of our experience. Well, here's an opportunity for you to explore it, to see what you can learn about both the body and the mind as you do this.

So the meditation is not simply a matter of technique. It's also a matter of the

qualities of the mind you bring to it: a combination of samvega and pasada, and—building on them—a combination of heedfulness, ardency, resolution, and the element of joy.

If your practice seems to be reaching an impasse, ask yourself: Which of these aspects are you missing? Are you getting complacent? Are you getting discouraged? Once you can identify the problem, try to build the confidence that, yes, there is a way around this.

After all, many people in the past have done this. And it wasn't the case that they were all great intellects or fierce warriors from birth. They were human beings just like us, with all of our strengths and weaknesses—sometimes worse weaknesses than we have now. Yet they were able to find the strengths they needed to get past these problems.

They could do it; you can do it, too.