

Sensitivity & Strength

April 5, 2008

Tonight is the fourth anniversary of Ajahn Suwat's passing away. And as we're sitting here meditating, I thought it might be good to think about how he taught meditation.

He'd usually start out by saying, "Get yourself ready to meditate. Put your mind in good shape to meditate". By that he meant developing an attitude of confidence, conviction, and a sense of feeling inspired by the opportunity to sit here and develop the mind. In other words, get yourself in the right mood to meditate. Have the right attitude toward the meditation. You're here to learn something. Part of the meditation involves following a particular technique, but not just following the technique. It also involves having an inquisitive state of mind, one that wants to learn new things.

And here we have the opportunity to learn about our minds. This is pretty rare in the world. You look at mainstream society: People are all too willing to fill up your mind with all kinds of ideas—that you should think this, should be interested in that. They want to define you. Here's your chance to get out of their definitions, to see what's really going on in your mind.

So that would be the first step—he'd be talking about getting in the right mood, the right attitude.

Then as far as the actual technique, it'd be pretty much up to you. If you liked repeating the word *buddho*, that was fine. If you liked focusing on the breath, that was fine as well. If you liked to think of any of the 32 parts of the body, if you found that conducive to a state of calm and detachment, that would be fine, too, because the whole point of concentration is to give the mind an object it feels comfortable with. In some cases, it feels immediately comfortable with the object. In other cases, you have to learn how to work with the object to make it more comfortable.

You can work with the breath this way. Breathe in a way that's comfortable, feels good inside. What kind of breathing would feel good right now? That's a good question to start with, because it's a question you can answer by observing what's going on right here, right now. A lot of the questions we carry around in our heads are things we can't really answer. There's nothing we can observe. It's all conjecture. But it's good to start with something you can know directly.

And if you learn how to ask the right questions, it gets more and more interesting. Where do you feel the sensation of the breathing? Do those feelings,

those pulses of energy or waves of energy, give you more energy to the body, or do they subtract energy from the body? The breath is what keeps us alive, you know, but there are ways of breathing that make the body tense, tight, and drain its energy away.

So just pose the question in the mind—what kind of breath would feel really good right now, just this one breath? Which part of the body could use a little gratification just by allowing a nice wave of energy to flow through it? Which parts have been neglected? Which parts are the little Cinderellas of your body? The ones that do all the work but don't get any reward? You can reward them with nice breathing. Think of the breath as a wave that comes along and nourishes every little cell in the body. You want to give the mind something that really feels good inside, and also gives you an opportunity to explore.

There's a scene in Kurt Vonnegut's novel, *The Sirens of Titan*, where he describes the planet Mercury. In his imagination, Mercury is a big honeycombed crystal, filled with little kite-like beings. They're shaped like kites and they have little suction cups on all four corners. The crystal of Mercury has one side to the sun, another side to outer space, and because of the temperature difference it vibrates with a deep musical hum. The beings live off the vibrations, and because they don't have to feed off each other, they live in total peace.

Try to think of your body that way. All the little cells are like those little kites, feeding off the energy of the breath coming through the body. In Kurt Vonnegut's imagination these little kite-like being of Mercury sing along with the vibration. They have two songs that they repeat over and over again. One is, "Here I am, here I am, here I am." The other is, "So glad you are, so glad you are." So think of the cells in your body: "Here I am." Each little cell: "Here I am." And the others are singing, "So glad you are." In other words, think of the breath as a cooperative process, one that feels really good inside.

There are basically three steps to the meditation. One is learning how to do it. The other is learning how to keep it going. And the third is learning how to use it. It's like amassing wealth. Some people know how to gain wealth, but they don't know how to keep it. Or they know how to keep it, but they don't know how to put it to good use. For it to be really helpful, you need to do all three things, realizing that they are three separate skills. Once you've got the mind in good shape like this, then you have to maintain it. In the same way, when you get the breath in good shape like this, you have to maintain it.

There may be a sense that this is kind of boring. So you have to learn how to make a game out of it. Again, learn how to make it something you really like doing. And that comes by asking questions. "How long can I keep this going?

How much of the sense of ease and rapture can I take without losing touch with the breath?" If you lose touch with the breath, the whole thing collapses. You've earned your wealth, but you weren't able to maintain it. So exactly how do you need to tend this sense of fullness that you can develop in the body, so that you can keep all those cells singing, "Here I am, here I am. So glad you are, so glad you are"?

Of course, one of the ways of maintaining this is to realize that this is a really valuable opportunity. You're learning an important skill: how to develop a sense of fullness that you can then carry into the rest of your life. Meditation isn't just about sitting here with your eyes closed. You want to gain a sense of well-being that you can carry around as you walk, as you engage in other activities, as you talk with other people. You need practice in all these things. This is part of the maintaining.

So try to make that part of your meditation, too. I don't know how many people who've come here complain that there's not enough time to do sitting and walking practice. Well, it's because there are other practices as well. It's all part of the practice. How do you do chores with a sense of fullness and rapture? How do you wash the dishes, how do you pull weeds in the orchard, how do you engage with other people here and still maintain a sense of inner fullness? It's an important skill. On the one hand, it requires not letting yourself get invaded by other people's moods. And it requires being sensitive to how things feel inside regardless of how you feel about the people around you. Once you can do that in a gentle environment like this, you're more likely to be able to maintain it as you go into other more challenging environments.

This connects with another point that Ajaan Suwat liked to make: that when the mind is in concentration, it's both very sensitive and very strong. On the one hand, it's sensitive to the slightest wavering that's going on in the mind, doing your best to maintain the sense of steadiness, fullness, refreshment. On the other hand, you're trying to be resilient, so that when people approach you with their negative moods, you don't absorb them. You can think of the breath as a shield, a cocoon that surrounds the body. It's a transparent cocoon: You can see and know everything that's going on around you, but you don't absorb it. The breath is like an electromagnetic field that repels negative energies.

This is when you start moving from the duty of maintaining to the duty of putting it to use. In the course of trying to maintain this, you begin to see where your mind has its weaknesses, where your attachments are. This is what you have to question when you get pulled away by certain thoughts. You have to ask yourself, "Why should I allow that thought to pull me away? When those

thoughts come up, how do they come up?" Sometimes they move in and totally take over the mind. That should raise a question. How did it happen? This is a big gap in your mindfulness. Suddenly you find yourself in a totally different thought world. Well, it is something you can observe if you make up your mind you want to learn about it.

This should be one of the first questions that comes up in the course of the meditation. You make up your mind to stay with the breath, and five minutes later you find yourself off in New York, or in Kansas, or in Thailand, or planning something for tomorrow, thinking about yesterday, all these other things. Where did they come from? How did it happen? This should alert you to the fact that there's more than one voice in the mind, more than one intention going on.

Sometimes other intentions slip in. And the question is, why did you go along with them? We tend to think that we just pass out and find ourselves in another world. But there is a point where we actually agree to go along with the passing out. It's a trick the mind plays on itself. So one question you might want to ask is, "How does that happen? Where was the moment where I said Yes to going off to this and then managed to forget about it?" The forgetting is a trick the mind plays with itself, when it's made up its mind to do one thing but really wants to do something else—or, to put it in other words, where one part wants to do the meditation and another part wants to do the thinking, and you change sides.

When you see this process happening, that gives you some more control over the mind, because you can make up your mind whether you want to go with the thought or not, because some thoughts really are worth going with. It's not that the Buddha taught us not to think at all, he just taught us the ability not to think as an important skill as part of our repertoire. But he also taught us how to think, how to ask questions. This is why so much of the Canon is phrased in questions, not only so that we can hear the Buddha's answers, but also so that we can look at how he phrases the questions. Sometimes he rephrases somebody else's questions before he answers them. There's a lesson there. It's the process of questioning and answering that's important to learn: how to properly pose a question to the mind and then how to observe the answer.

The basic questions the Buddha approved of fall into four categories. Where is there stress and suffering? What is it that arises together with the stress and suffering? What is it that passes away and causes stress and suffering to pass away? And what qualities of mind can we develop so that we can understand this better, so that we can put an end to suffering for good? You learn to look at your experience in terms of these four categories. Within each category there are more questions: What's the appropriate skill right here, right now?

Some people would have us believe that there's just one skill to the meditation, such as noting or accepting or whatever. But actually, there are four basic skills that you have to learn how to apply appropriately to whichever category is central to the mind at that point. When there's stress, you want to comprehend it. Comprehending means understanding it to the point where you lose all passion, aversion, and delusion around it. With the cause of stress, the skill is learning how to let it go. With the cessation of stress, the skill is learning how to realize it; and with the path to the cessation, the skill is learning how to develop it.

There are things you have to build in the mind. This is what concentration is all about. You're building mindfulness. You're building alertness. Once the concentration is there, then you start using it as a basis for answering these questions for yourself by observing, figuring out how to observe what's going on, what you should do with regard to whatever comes up, which categories it falls into so you know what to do with regard to it. Then you start noticing how to do it skillfully. Those are the questions you bring. You learn how to phrase things in terms of those questions, and you know how to look at your experience in terms of those questions from the point of view of a concentrated mind. That's when you begin to see things you never saw before, to attain things you've never attained before. That's when you get the most out of the meditation.

So it's not just a process of putting the mind through the mill. There *are* the techniques of concentration, but then there are also the questions that give rise to insight. And you learn from experience. It's not just a matter of doing concentration until concentration is fully developed and then turning to other issues. You work both on the intentional technique in the concentration practice, and on the questions that come up in the course of the practice, because concentration gets more solid when you learn how to ask questions in terms of the four noble truths when any distraction comes up. You can start seeing through the distraction, seeing it for what it is, realizing what you should do with it, and that helps the mind get more and more concentrated, more and more solid. Both of those qualities, Ajaan Suwat referred to as the tenderness of the mind, the sensitivity. You get more and more sensitive to the issues you're dealing with, but there's also added solidity and strength that comes from dealing with the issues well.

So keep these three activities of the meditation in mind—learning how to do it, learning how to maintain it, and learning how to put it to use. Concentration is your inner wealth. You learn how to amass it, how to protect it so that it doesn't get wasted, and then you learn how to put it to even better use. After all, wealth

itself isn't something you can eat. You can't wear it, you can't drive it. You have to use it.

The same with the concentration. You can gain some satisfaction from concentration but what's really gratifying is when you start using it to understand the mind better so that you don't have to suffer anymore. That's when you've put your concentration to good use. In that way, the meditation becomes not so much a retreat from life, but a preparation for life, so that you can handle all the really important issues in life with sensitivity and strength.