

A Gift of Stillness

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There's a story in Ajaan Lee's autobiography of a senior monk in Bangkok who was sick and so Ajaan Lee went to visit him. Now, this senior monk had very little use for the Wilderness Tradition, so it wasn't the case that he had a lot of faith in Ajaan Lee. But Ajaan Lee just sat in one corner of the room and meditated. After a while the senior monk began to have a sense that something was coming from Ajaan Lee's corner, having an effect on his body. So he asked Ajaan Lee, "What are you doing?" and Ajaan Lee said, "I'm making a gift of quiet, a gift of silence." And the senior monk said, "Well, whatever it is, keep on doing it. It feels really good." And so Ajaan Lee would go back every day to meditate in the senior monk's room. After a while, they started talking, and he actually taught meditation to the senior monk, who had never meditated before. As a result, he changed the senior monk's ideas about the Wilderness Tradition and about the possibility of getting results from meditation.

Now, Ajaan Lee's powers of concentration were very strong. But the basic principle applies to us as well. When your mind is quiet, you have an effect on the people around you. And often when people are sick or weak is when they pick up on it most. So when you're sitting here meditating, you're not the only one who's going to benefit. The people around you benefit as well. You have a good influence on them. Most people's minds just wash around without any real fixed foundation. If they can sense a stable foundation nearby, even though it's not inside them, they can pick up on that sense of stability. It's calming to them, reassuring.

So that's one way that your meditation can have an impact on others. You try to carry it into whatever situation you enter.

This is why it's important that you remember that the skills you're learning here as you're sitting here with your eyes closed aren't meant to be used only here. They're skills you can use wherever you go. After all, you go with your body, you go with your breath. And you can think about them while you're engaged in other activities.

We're used to multi-tasking. Even before we had computers and other distracting devices, our minds had some multi-tasking going on—thinking about that, worrying about this, remembering that, planning this—all going on pretty much at the same time. And yet people often say that while they're working, they can't focus on the breath at the same time. What you've got to learn how to do is clear out all that unnecessary multi-tasking and just put the breath in its place, so you can work and be sensitive to how the breath energy is going in your body: where it feels good, where it doesn't feel good, where your trigger centers are—in other words, the spots in the body that tend to tense up most quickly when there's fear or anger, lust, greed, or whatever.

Some people find it primarily around the solar plexus. With other people it's more in the chest. Actually, it can be anywhere in the body. But you want to learn where your triggers are so you can very consciously keep them relaxed, open, still, all the time. If you can't maintain an awareness of the whole body, at least be sensitive to the trigger points. If something comes up and you sense a stirring there or a tightening there, relax it immediately. Try to protect that sense of

relaxation as you breathe in, as you breathe out, as you go through whatever the situation is. When you're feeling attacked by somebody else, go right there, protect that spot. And you find that as you have a protected spot, you're going to feel less threatened. You're more likely to think of the right thing to say or, at least, the least harmful thing to say, the more appropriate thing to say. This is not 100% guaranteed, but you're giving yourself a much better chance because you're coming from a better place.

This is another way in which your meditation can influence other people. When you have a sense of wellbeing or at least one stable spot inside, you're feeling less threatened. When you feel less threatened, your actions can be more thoughtful, less harmful. They can actually be more beneficial, because you have something good to share. When the mind is still, it's also a lot easier to remember whatever lessons you've learned about right speech, right action, remembering to keep the needs of other people in mind, remembering to keep their situation in mind. When your mind is less consumed by your own suffering, you have more room for considering the sufferings of others.

This is why one of the most ironic things that people say about meditation is that it's a selfish activity. They accuse the people sitting here with their eyes closed of ignoring the problems of the world. Well, we do have our eyes closed but we close them so that we can work on an important skill needed to treat the basic problem in the world. It's a skill that's used not only right here as you meditate but also as your "right here" moves into the world. When there's a sense of wellbeing in your heart, you can just let it flow out through the body, radiate out. Then you'll have a much better foundation for doing and saying and thinking the right thing.

Again it's not all automatic. If everybody whose minds were rightly concentrated or at least well concentrated could think of always the right thing to do and say and think, we wouldn't have had to wait until the Buddha gained awakening. It would have happened a long time before that because people were practicing concentration before that. But whatever wisdom you've learned, it's a lot easier to have it at your fingertips when the mind is still. And you have this sense of awareness that's flowing out in all directions from a stable center.

So this is your gift of stillness to yourself and to the people around you. And remembering that you're not the only one who benefits is often a good way of energizing your practice. Sometimes you think, "Well, this is good enough for me for tonight," but then you ask yourself, "Do I have enough to share with other people, that I can maintain for their sake?" So you realize that you might have to meditate more, and when you get up from the meditation you have to try to maintain that sense of balance. It's like balancing a cup of coffee on a saucer while you're sitting and then getting up and keeping it balanced and not spilling anything; walking through the room and not spilling anything. In the same way, you don't want your concentration to spill, to tip over. You want it to stay balanced.

And that sense of balance and stillness: That's your gift. So learn how to protect it. At first it's going to be a little awkward, but over time you find that it is possible to keep this balanced state of mind, this balanced sense of the breath being nourishing, open, refreshing inside and doing other things at the same time.

This is one of the reasons why we do walking meditation: to learn how to

maintain that sense of balance and stillness even though the body is moving. And then from there you can add other activities on top of that. But always think of this as your foundation. It's not just one more ball to keep in the air as you're juggling all kinds of things. It's the spot where you're standing as you juggle. In other words, it's an essential foundation for everything else you want to do. When you've started getting used to having this sense of the center, you wonder how you functioned before you had it. And although simply concentrating the mind is not going to solve all your problems, it makes the problems a lot easier.

So don't abandon the center. Learn how to keep it going in all your activities, in all your sitting, standing, walking, lying down, whatever. Give this first priority, and it will spread its good influence around.