

Eight Principles

August 8, 2012

I was reading once about a person visiting Japan during the summer. One day it was really hot and humid, and he commented to the mother of the family where he was staying: "It's really hot." And the mother said, "Yes, the cicadas really are loud, aren't they?" So tonight the cicadas are loud. It's been a warm day. But we have to learn how to be content. We have a place to practice where it's quiet. We can find seclusion. Even though the temperature may not be the temperature we like, a lot of the other factors are perfectly fine. This is one of the ways in which you put up with difficult situations: You focus on the parts that aren't difficult. Look at the opportunities. Look at the advantages that you still have even in a very hot day and a very hot place. These are areas where we should learn to be content. If you think in the right way, the heat doesn't have to weigh down on you.

Remember that story about Ajaan Fuang. He was suddenly caught in a rainstorm one night, and all he had was his little umbrella tent, which provided very little protection from the wind and rain. So he decided to meditate on the theme: The body may be wet, but the mind isn't wet. He contemplated that, repeated it to himself and contemplated it at the same time, until the mind really did take note of the fact that wetness was not a property of the mind. It was a property of the body. But when you take possession of the body, there you are. You're open to the suffering of being wet and cold. Here, in the heat, you're open to the suffering of being hot, if you take possession of the body, if that's what you're focusing on. But remember: You have the choice to focus or not.

One of the ways to content yourself is to focus on things that are easy right now, things that are convenient. So you can focus on the issue where you should not be content, the fact that there are still unskillful qualities in the mind. This is one of the areas where we really do have to put forth effort.

Altogether, there are three areas where we have to focus our efforts. You can find them in the Buddha's teaching to Gotami about the eight basic principles for measuring what's Dhamma and Vinaya what's not. The three are these: how you relate to yourself in the practice, what goals you've set for the practice, and how your practice has an impact on other people. For your practice to be good in an all around way, you have to be sensitive to all three areas.

The three principles that have to do with your practice, how you deal with yourself, are contentment, aroused persistence, and shedding.

"Shedding" here seems to apply primarily to the shedding of pride, because pride gets in the way of our learning anything from anybody. There are stories in the Theragatha and Therigatha of monks and nuns who had to overcome their pride before they could practice. For example, there was a young man who was really proud of his good looks. He refused to bow down to anyone, even his parents. Yet

finally one day he was able to bow down to the Buddha, and he realized how foolish he had been. The looks of the body are nothing. Because what is this body? It's nothing but material elements with all these orifices that have things oozing and flowing out all the time. And it's just waiting to die.

If you're not proud about your body, you might be proud about your attainments, proud about how intelligent you are, how good a meditator you are. It's true that there's a certain amount of self-confidence needed in the practice, but when pride gets in the way, that's the end. You stop right there.

It's interesting that when the Buddha talks about the factors of your practice vis-a-vis yourself in those eight principles, he focuses on contentment, shedding pride, and then arousing your persistence. In the areas where you're holding on to pride that's getting in the way of your learning, you have to be happy to let it go. Realize that it's a burden, something to drop. If there are areas where things outside that you're not content with, learn how to develop contentment. Do what you can to keep your efforts energized, persistently. These are the three issues to focus on as you relate to yourself in the practice.

Three of the other principles have to do more with your relationship with other people.

To begin with, you're modest. You don't go showing off what you've got. There's that story about the novice who was able to levitate everyday. He took Anuruddha's bowl—Anuruddha was his teacher—he took Anuruddha's bowl up to the big lake in the Himalayas. I've forgotten the name. But he didn't want anybody to know about his powers. So he was quiet about his attainments.

Another quality that has to do with your getting along with others is seclusion. You're really looking for a time to be quiet. As the Buddha says, when people come to visit you, you speak to them just to the extent that they will be happy to go away. Not that you're driving them away, but you take care of what they need and that's it. You don't stitch together a few extra connections to make them stay longer. The problem with those connecting strings is that when you try to pull on their strings, they'll have the right to pull on your strings—and then you won't have any time to practice. So you take care of people's needs and leave it at that. As meditators, our main way of taking care of their needs is to talk to them about their issues around the Dhamma. Then you can have time to go back to your practice.

The other quality having to do with your dealings with other people is being unburdensome: doing whatever you can not to place a burden on other people.

This is very directly tied to being content, but it also means looking after yourself. For instance, you know that we here depend on our supporters for our health care, so you do what you can to keep yourself healthy without placing a burden on others. It's a very delicate balancing act. But it's important that you keep this need for balance in mind, because the way you practice does have an impact on others. You want it to be a gift to them. The Buddha said that one of our motivations for practicing should be that if we reach one of the noble attainments,

then the gifts that people have given us will bear them great fruit. Our practice is our way of paying them back.

So there's no clear line between your inner practice and your dealings with other people. Shedding is connected to modesty. Contentment is connected to being unburdensome. When you arouse persistence, it's connected to your seclusion.

And all of this is for the sake of the two factors dealing with the results of the practice: being unfettered and dispassion. The two of them go together because passion is our primary fetter.

The big issue for passion, of course is passion for sensuality. That's the one we have to focus on first. All too often you hear people focusing first on trying hard not to get stuck on the pleasure of concentration. Actually, we want you to get stuck on concentration first so that you can let go of your other attachments. As the Buddha once said, if you don't have the pleasure that comes from jhana or something better, you're not going to be able to let go of your attachment to sensuality. No matter how much you understand the drawbacks of sensuality, no matter what you've read about the topic and worked on your discernment to see the drawbacks to sensuality, you're going to need something to take its place. So for the time being, allow yourself to get passionate about concentration. As Ajaan Fuang once said, you're never going to meditate really well unless you're crazy about the meditation.

So when you're in situations where you don't have much time in the course of the day, part of your mind should be looking for the little cracks in your schedule: the little patches of time times when you can be with the breath, and really study the issues of the breath. Learn to understand what this bodily fabrication is. It has an impact on feelings and, of course, feelings have an impact on the mind. And as you think about the breath and evaluate the breath, you learn about perceptions. All these fabrications—bodily, verbal, and mental—are intimately connected.

And when you're doing concentration, they're all right here. You can see ways of dealing with the breath that have to do with putting physical pressure on it, changing your posture, relaxing muscles and the different patterns of tension in the body. How do you relax them? Well, you pay attention to them. Ajaan Lee talks about how your breath and your mindfulness—and here by mindfulness he means both mindfulness and alertness—are like a medicine. As you survey the body, you'll find some spots that are tightened, obstructed, too solid. Just focus on them very gently and develop a sense of just how much pressure of your focus is appropriate, and how much is too much. As you get sensitive to this issue, your focus can become a healing focus—mindfulness combined with breath—that dissolves the tension away.

It's in this way that being crazy about the meditation is a good way of developing discernment around the body. You learn a lot of things about how you hold the body, how you breathe, how the breath has an impact on your perceptions, how your perceptions have an impact on the breath—because that's another way of adjusting the breath: simply changing your perception of it.

Visualizing the body as a sponge is one perception that can be helpful in opening up the breath energy. Or as Ajaan Fuang once recommended, you can visualize a column of breath energy in the middle of the body, from the head on down. Then think, when the breath comes in, that it's coming in through all your pores, coming in to nourish that column, and then going out from that column. There's also the perception of what Ajaan Lee calls the tough breath—in Thai it's *lom niao*, a hard concept to translate in English. *Lom niao* literally means a breath that's tough, sticky, or viscous. But it's basically the breath seen as really solid. It's the kind of breath that allows you to sit here without needing to breathe. It's a solid, strong breath with no ripples or gaps. It's not so much a moving breath; it's a solid, still breath, allowed to fill the body. Just hold that perception in mind, and you'll see that it has an impact on how you breathe.

So there's a lot to explore here when you get crazy about your meditation. You begin to realize that this area of the body—the body as you feel it from within—has lots of issues going on and lots of interesting possibilities. And they're very intimately related to interesting things happening in the mind.

This is one of the ways in which you can loosen your passion for sensual pleasures because you've found the passion for concentration: the things you can learn, and the benefits you gain from focusing on the breath whenever you have the chance.

It's only after you've explored these things really thoroughly that you can ultimately develop a dispassion for them, too. But in the meantime, work primarily on those fetters of sensuality or passion for sensuality through the various means that the Buddha recommended.

Being content: That's the big one. When you find that you're not content with your situation, ask yourself, "What are you thirsting for? What are you hungering for? And once you get it, how long can you keep it? Is it worth it? Wouldn't it be better to develop the skills of mind where you don't need things?" If you're going to be discontented about something, focus on the fact that you still haven't put enough effort into the practice. There are certain things in the mind you haven't shed yet. As for dealing with others, work on the work that needs to be done here in the monastery, and then the rest of the time can be time for seclusion. Do what you can not to be a burden.

Be helpful, but modest. When you live in this way, you're practicing the Dhamma in line with the Dhamma, for the sake of the Dhamma. That's when our life here together yields benefits—and how your own practice yields benefits. There's a continuum here. It's not just one or the other.

It's in seeing how all these things come together that you really understand them and get the most out of them.