

Respect Your Center

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One of the most important skills you want to develop as a meditator is to find where your home base is: the place in the body where the breath feels good, and the mind feels at home when it's focused there. You want to know that spot and learn how to work with it, learn how to come back to it as quickly as you can if you've lost it.

This will take some exploration, experimenting with different spots and noticing where your mind tends to go, sometimes unintentionally. There's a spot where it seems to want to settle down, and it feels good there. It feels right being there. Ajaan Lee gives a list: top of the head, middle of the forehead, right at your palate, in your neck, in the middle of the chest, right above the navel. Those are the main ones, but you might find that you have a spot of your own.

In addition to identifying it, you want to learn how to work with the energy there. The reason Ajaan Lee focuses on these spots is because the breath energy tends to be very sensitive in those spots. They're spots where, when you find yourself tensing up—say, around fear or anger—the tightness comes very quickly. You want to be sensitive to that so that you can let it disperse.

This is the spot that you carry into your walking meditation. From walking meditation, you carry it into your life. In walking meditation, you've got two other things that you have to balance with your focus on that spot: the movement of the body and your surroundings. When you're doing regular walking meditation, your surroundings are pretty simple. Simply make sure you don't walk off the end of the path or off the side of the path; know when to turn around. But it is more than you have to deal with when you're just sitting here.

Similarly with the movement of the body: It's a very basic movement, just walking. It's good to get familiar with that basic movement to notice how you carry the body and how the way you carry the body has an impact on the spot you've discovered.

So you've got three things to focus on. In addition to that, of course, there's the ability—once you have a comfortable spot—to focus on the breath energy, learning how to allow that comfortable energy to spread throughout the body. Again, you work with this first while you're sitting so that when you're spreading energy through the body, you're not spreading energy that's harmful or tight. You're letting good energy radiate out from a spot that feels really good. And as

you're walking, you try to maintain that sense of its feeling really good without clamping down on it.

This is one of the important skills of meditation as well: knowing how to maintain focus on a part of the body without clamping down on the circulation of blood or tightening up the muscles in that area. It's an instinctive reaction we all have, and it's something you have to unlearn if you want the concentration really to feel at home.

So as you're walking, try to see how the energy or the movement of the walking relates to the energy in the spot you've chosen. See if you can allow the energy to flow naturally from that spot through the body as it's walking, at the same time learning how to protect that spot in spite of the movement of the body, and in spite of the fact that you have to be aware of your surroundings. Ajaan Lee gives an image of having really good food that you want to protect in a covered dish to make sure flies don't land on it. The Buddha's image is of having a bowl of oil balanced on your head: You don't want a single drop to spill. I like Ajaan Lee's image because it gives you a sense of how precious this is. This is something you don't want to throw away.

You want to learn how to maintain this because eventually you want to carry it into more complex activities as you deal with other aspects of your life, being able to handle those three main areas of interest: this central spot that you want to maintain; your own activities; and the activities around you. Now, as you go out into daily life at work or at home, your own activities get more complex, and what's going on around you gets more complex as well. But you still want to be able to maintain that sense of a still and nourishing center—something that's precious, something you want to protect.

There's so much in our lives that we tend to throw away. We throw away a lot of the time that we have. Look at our society: People seem to take a very cavalier attitude to all kinds of things; things get thrown away very easily. Almost everything gets treated with disrespect. But you don't want to treat your own mind with disrespect, which is why you want to maintain this center with an attitude of respect.

This is one of the reasons why we have this culture of respect here at the monastery. You're learning something really important. These are life-and-death matters: your ability to take care of your own mind and not let the activities from outside come in and destroy your goodness—and not let your own unskillful tendencies overturn that bowl of oil. Don't let the flies of your own unskillful tendencies come and lay eggs in your food.

You want to respect this sense of the center, the mind's need for a home. After all, you are respecting your desire for true happiness, which society doesn't tend to encourage. But the Buddha says this is one of the things you really have to respect more than anything else. Ajaan Mun has a nice image in one of his final Dhamma talks. You're going into battle, and you've got a series of weapons. Your concentration practice is your food; discernment, your weapon; mindfulness and all the other aspects of the practice, the other things you need as a soldier. The question is: Who's the soldier? It's your determination not to come back as the laughingstock of the defilements to suffer ever again. You've got to have that determination that this is something really important, something you really want. That's what you've got to protect.

This is a truth of the will. It doesn't just happen. I don't know how many times I've heard people say, "Well, just allow the mind to settle in, and it's just going to naturally grow without your having to really do anything about it." In some cases, that's true, but in a lot of areas, you have to go against tendencies of the mind that *seem* natural. You have to really want *not* to suffer because all too often it's all too natural to throw this away and say, "What the hell! I'll just have a nice, easy life, a normal life like everybody else. That's good enough." But it's not.

There's aging. Illness. Death. Separation. These are things you can't throw away. They come at you, and the mind isn't prepared for them if it isn't trained. If it doesn't have its inner resources well developed, you can suffer an awful, awful lot. So here's your opportunity not to suffer. You want to make the most of that. It's your precious food. It's the oil in the bowl that you don't want to spill.

So as we're sitting here, learn how to find your center. Learn how to maintain that sense of good energy. Learn how to use that good energy as it spreads through the body. Then learn how to maintain this same sense of center as you get up and do walking meditation, as you deal with other issues in your life. This is one thing you never want to throw away. No matter how strong the currents of the world come in from outside, no matter how strong your other contrary emotions come up from within, you don't want these things to overturn the bowl of oil. You don't want them to overturn your plate of good food and dump it on the ground.

Don't treat your desire for true happiness as something you can throw away. As Ajaan Lee once said, we're taught to let go of things, but we're not taught to let go like a poor person. You let go when you're rich. You've really got something good inside? Then you don't have to worry about holding on any more when it's solidly there.

But until you're there, this is something you really have to hold on to, look after, tend to, and respect because it gives meaning and purpose to everything else.