

# *Not Getting What You Want*

*July 27, 2013*

Each time you meditate, you want to get your mind out of the story of the day's events. Otherwise, those stories will come in and invade your meditation. This is one of the reasons why we spread thoughts of goodwill in all directions. Spread the mind out in wide circles. Circle around to the east, south, west and north, thinking of all living beings. That helps to put a lot of your issues into perspective.

Then when you've done that, can you genuinely say that you have no ill will for anyone? You may have to work through a few cases, your feelings toward a few difficult people. This requires reminding yourself that goodwill doesn't necessarily mean you have to like the person. It's simply that you don't wish that person ill, and you hope that if that person is misbehaving or doing something really unskillful, he or she will see the error of his or her ways. That's something you can feel for anyone, and it's totally harmless. After you've circled around like that, then you can zero in on the present moment right here with the breath.

Try to be as continually as you can with the sensation of breathing in, breathing out. Try to inhabit your body as much as you can: being in the feet, in the hands, in *all* the parts of the body. This is what gives you a good foundation. Otherwise, the mind tends to skip off into thoughts and abstractions. When it's running around like that, it doesn't have a really good place to sit and look at things for what they are.

Try to create a sense of well-being with the breath. In other words, breathe in a way that feels comfortable. Don't force the breath; don't squeeze it. But you can pose the question in mind, "What kind of breathing would feel good right now?" See how the body responds. And if there's not much of a response, then you can experiment. Just say, "longer breathing," and see what longer breathing feels like. "Shorter." And then compare the two. Deeper, more shallow, heavier, lighter, faster, slower.... Make an inventory of how

the different ways of breathing feel for the body right now. Then decide which one feels best or which combination feels best. Stick with that as long as it feels good. When it starts *not* feeling good, you can change.

You want to be on top of things—what the body needs right now. Develop a sensitivity to the body. We, especially in the West, tend to live too much in our heads. So you want to resist any tendency to fly off into heady abstractions. You may have heard that the formless states are more refined than being in the body, so that's where you want to go right away. But they're not going to be solid until you've learned how to stay solidly with the body. This means getting sensitive to what feels right here, what feels wrong here, and learning how to make whatever adjustments are needed.

When you've done this, after circling around with thoughts of goodwill and then zeroing in on the breath, you've got the mind in a really good place. You can look at something you don't ordinarily like to look at, which is the extent to which you're causing yourself suffering. When the Buddha analyzes suffering in the four noble truths, he talks about the suffering of not getting what you want, the suffering of having to be with what you don't like, and of being separated from what you do like. And you notice, his solution is not to go out and try to get what you want. It's to look inside. What are you clinging to inside? How are you turning this situation into suffering in an unnecessary way?

If you pose this question in the mind when it's not feeling settled and secure with itself in the present moment, it's going to resist. It'll say, "Well, of course, that other person was wrong." Or, "Of course, that situation is not right." "Of course, I'm perfectly justified in trying to get what I want." But when the mind is settled, you begin to see: You really are adding a lot of unnecessary stress and suffering to the situation with your dislike for the situation, your resistance. This is not to say that you should simply roll over when things are not going well. But you have to realize the extent to which, when things are not going well and you can't do a thing about them, you're just banging your head against a wall. You've really got to stop and look. What's accomplished

by banging your head against the wall? What's accomplished by complaining?

One of the first lessons I had to learn with Ajaan Fuang was that you don't complain. You recognized that things were wrong, but complaining was not going to be the solution. The solution was to look inside, because there are a lot of things in the world you can't change. You're stuck in situations sometimes that you don't like. You're stuck with people you don't like. There are some definite injustices going on all around. But trying to solve the problems through anger is just adding more trouble. You're putting the wrong energy in. First, you've got to settle the mind and look at yourself. What am I holding on to? What am I clinging to? Would it be possible to let it go?

The Buddha talks about five things we cling to. We cling to our sense of the body. We cling to our feelings of pleasure and pain. We cling to our perceptions—the labels we apply to things. We cling to all the thoughts that we fabricate around things: good, bad, true, false. And we cling to our awareness of these things. He has you break these things down into impersonal activities to help try to get *you* out of the way so you can see clearly: “Okay, there is this movement in the mind. And as soon as there's this movement in the mind, there's going to be suffering. When the movement stops, the stress and the suffering stop.” Then you've got your choice. Do you want to keep moving in that way, or can you stop?

Again, this is best done when the mind is really still, so you can see these movements as they're happening and you can step back from them a bit. You've got this foundation with the breath that allows you to step outside of your thought-worlds and to see where you're adding problems. And if the situation outside really is bad, you'll be in a much better position to do something skillful about it because you're not coming out of anger. You're not coming out of clinging to the idea that it has to be this way; it has to be that way. You can look and actually think more outside of the box when you're not so firmly holding on to what you thought was right, what was going into the situation.

Sometimes you can see that difficult situations, instead of being obstacles, are actually opportunities. They're challenging opportunities, but they really do help you grow. And there is the possibility for some positive change if you look at them in the right way. That's what meditation is all about, looking at things in the right way so that problems do get solved. You're not just piling more and more problems on top of things. I mean, there is an extent to which things cannot be changed. People are born. They get old as a result; they get ill as a result; and they die as a result. We tend to like birth but not all the things that come as a result of birth. And some of those things cannot be prevented.

That's the basic stress. In terms of the Buddha's teachings, it's called the stress in the three characteristics. Anything that's fabricated—in other words, anything that's put together by nature, put together by causes—is going to have to have these three qualities: inconstant, i.e. it's wavering and undependable; stressful because it is so fabricated; and that it's not really worth calling it yourself because you don't have total control over it. If you try to create a sense of self out of something you don't control, you're setting yourself up for trouble. You're going to suffer. Those kinds of characteristics are just there in the world, so that kind of stress is going to be there all the time.

But there's the other stress that you add to things, and this is the stress in the four noble truths—the stress that comes from the clinging. What's clinging? You have certain ways of acting that you just hold on to, certain ways of thinking you just keep repeating again and again and again, and you're not willing to change. When the mind settles down, you can start asking yourself, "Is there another way of thinking? Is there another way of perceiving this? Can I loosen my grip on some of my old ways of thinking?"

That way, even though you may still not be getting what you want outside— or still find yourself in a situation that you don't like or in a situation where you're separated from what you do like—you don't have to suffer. The suffering is optional. And all the issues you create around it—the fact that you don't like it and so on—are optional, too. That's

often the hardest thing to see because the types of issues we create usually have a lot to do with the kind of person we think we are: things we'll stand, things we will not stand for, deciding this has to be like that, that has to be like this.

So one of the virtues of meditation is that it can put you in a position where you can step back and look at these attitudes from a more objective perspective, from a greater sense of inner well-being and stability, and admit to yourself, "Oh yeah, I have been adding unnecessary stress here. I've been part of the problem, but I don't have to be." When you can do that, you can let go of a lot of burdens, and you find that other people around you are relieved as well. And sometimes you can act for the positive good. You may be stuck in a situation where all you can see are the limitations. But when you step back a bit, you begin to realize, "There are opportunities here."

Even in a situation where you find that you don't have as much time to meditate as you'd like, remember the Buddha said that one of the ways we can develop the mind is through the way we treat other people. There are opportunities to treat other people in a harmless way, to treat other people with sympathy, with goodwill, to develop patience.

Patience is the poor stepsister of all these qualities that we develop when we meditate—the one nobody likes, but the one that everybody has to depend on. One thing that helps with patience is having this sense of a comfortable center inside. So patience doesn't mean that you simply have to grit your teeth and wait until whatever it is passes. It's more your ability to be in a difficult situation and yet not suffer from it because you're placing your hopes for happiness in another spot, on your ability to develop good qualities of mind. That possibility is there regardless of what the situation is—regardless of how bad it is.

There are always good qualities of mind that you can grow, so look for that possibility. And how are you going to look for it? You've got to get the mind to settle down first so it can put aside unskillful attitudes that are getting in the way of seeing clearly what's actually going on—so that when

you leave meditation and begin to circle out to deal with the world outside again, you're coming from a much better place.