

Getting Back on Your Feet

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When I was living at Wat Dhammasathit, there was a vendor who would drive down the road in front of the monastery, fairly regularly, selling Chinese dumplings. Every day he'd be on his loudspeaker, and one of his regular sales pitches was, "Today's dumplings are better than yesterday's." And the next day he'd come down, "Today's dumplings are better than yesterday's."

This would keep up every day. I wondered if he was going to reach the Platonic ideal of dumplings.

But then someone pointed out to me, "Well, where are yesterday's dumplings right now, the ones you ate yesterday? If they're not in your intestines, they're down in the cesspit. So, Yes, today's dumplings are better than yesterday's."

This is something you always have to keep in mind when you're meditating, especially when you've suffered a setback in the meditation and you start thinking about how good it used to be. You have to remind yourself: How good it used to be is just a memory right now. Right now you have the breath and you have your awareness—and that's a lot better than the memory.

So don't let your memory of how good things used to be get in the way of actually settling down right now. In particular, don't get discouraged by the fact that it doesn't seem to be as nice as it was yesterday, or the day before, or last week or whatever. Or your mind is all over the place, as if you'd never meditated at all. Just put those thoughts aside. You've got *this* breath and then *this* breath.

Try to make each breath that you're with as comfortable and as gratifying as possible. This is one of the nice things about breath-work: You can actually get a fairly good, refreshing way of breathing going even when your mind is a little bit distracted. The rhythm can keep going even when you're beginning to think about other things. You catch yourself and you come back to check in: Is the rhythm still comfortable? If it is, you can keep it up. If it's not, you can change.

Especially when you've been dealing with a difficult situation in life—there are a lot of distractions, a lot of emotional issues tearing at you from different directions—good nourishing breathing is one of the best ways of doing repair work. Much better than the normal ways that we deal with difficult situations: eating too much or distracting ourselves. Here's a source of genuine, alert nourishment.

As you stay nourished here, there are few other things that are useful to do. One is that you can read about the Sangha. There are poems in the Theragatha

and Therigatha, and some of the autobiographical talks and writings of the ajaans. They give you a sense that even successful meditators have had their problems. Everybody has had setbacks.

Ajaan Maha Boowa talks about how, at the beginning of his practice, he'd get his mind really centered, and then it would just disintegrate before his eyes. And that was without a lot of distractions. It happened again and again and again, until finally he realized, "Why make a big deal out of it? Just keep going back to Step One." In his case, he would repeat *Buddho*. If he was with the breath, he would just go back to the breath.

If you feel discouraged by the fact that you've got to relearn those old things, look at it as an opportunity to get a more solid foundation this time around. Maybe there were some things in your old foundation that weren't good.

It's like the advantage of having a house blown down and realizing, "Oh, the original foundation wasn't good." Now's your chance to rebuild the foundation. As long as the house seemed good, you wouldn't go to the trouble of going down and strengthening the foundations. But now that it's blown down, you've got the opportunity to get back there and clean out the rubble and make sure this time that you're really going to make things solid and strong.

This time you're really going to make a good foundation. This time you really will focus on the breath rather than thinking ahead a little bit or back a little bit. Just be with the sensation in the present moment: this breath and then this breath and then this breath. And if the question comes up, "How many breaths do I have to do this?" You can say, "Don't ask that. Just keep doing it as long as you can."

Find things that help to inspire you. I particularly find it very inspiring to read about people who've had problems and were able to overcome them.

There's a story I read years back about an Olympic swimmer, Matt Biondi, who was expected to sweep all the gold medals for swimming in one particular Olympic Games. But then he didn't come in first on this first race. The commentators were all saying, "Oh, I guess that's it. He's going into a downward spin now." But his coach replied, "You don't know him." And sure enough, he won all his remaining races. He didn't let that first defeat get him down.

So it's a matter of learning how to fall and then pick yourself back up again. When aerial artists walk on a tightrope, it's not that they just glide across the rope, without leaning to the left or leaning to the right. They lean to the left, they lean to the right, but they know how to recover. In that way, leaning here, leaning there, doesn't destroy their sense of balance.

So take advantage of whatever you find that can help get you over the fall and pick yourself back up, dust yourself off, and keep on going. Some people like to

reflect that if the old meditation could be destroyed so easily, it must not have been good after all. Some people find that thought encouraging and other people don't. Take your choice.

But you also have to be very wary about letting the mind just wander around, saying, "I'm tired, I just need some time to take in a few good sights, smells, tastes, tactile sensations." You have to be very picky about which ones you're going to allow yourself to focus on. Some sights and smells and sounds are actually helpful, soothing to the mind when it's been frazzled by things. The sound of the crickets, the sound of the hummingbirds, the sounds of nature: Those are relaxing. They're actually healing. The sight of the huge thunderclouds off to the east this evening: Those kinds of things give respite for the mind.

But there are other ways in which we try to escape from difficult situations, usually with the media. Those are not so good. They give you little bit of food, but it's the kind of junk food that causes health problems down the line.

So restraint of the senses is important. All too often we misunderstand that. We think it means going around with blinders on our eyes, plugs in our ears. That's not what the Buddha meant when he said to keep your senses restrained or guarded. You basically look at how you're looking at things. When you're looking, *why* are you looking? What's the motivation? Greed? Aversion? delusion? Okay, don't look in that way. Don't let those members of the committee be the ones who take over your eyes.

Also look at the impact that whatever it is you're looking at has on the mind. Here again, if you see that it tends to stir up trouble, that's something you shouldn't be looking at. The same goes with the rest of the senses.

Or if you have to look at things of that sort, learn how to look at them in a different way. If you see something that inspires lust, look at the other side. This is why we have that contemplation of the 32 parts of the body. If thoughts of lust come up, you say, "Okay, take your body apart first. Which part of the body, if you lay them out on the ground, would inspire lust?" Then remember that the other person's body has that same type of thing. Hold that perception in mind. In other words, instead of allowing lust to do the looking, you have these thoughts do the looking. Or if there's somebody you really dislike, you can focus on their good side. Maybe they've done something good in the past.

The Buddha compares this to a monk who's looking for rags to make his robe. He needs the robe to protect his body. He finds a rag that's one-part clean and one-part dirty. He tears off the clean part with his foot and leaves the dirty part behind. Remind yourself that right now what you need is the clean part.

It's all too often the case that when we're looking at somebody we don't like or

hearing them speak, we place ourselves up on a judge's chair, high up there, looking down on this little person. We're in the position where we can pass judgment on them without any fear of reprisal. But the Buddha says, remind yourself, you're in a position of need. You need something from that person: You need that person's goodness, because your goodness is not going to be protected if you spend all your time looking at other people's bad traits.

Look at the country we have now, where people are getting cynical about all kinds of things, and they themselves become worse as a result. There's no sense of honor, justice, or integrity at all. All they look at is seeing other people having no integrity, and so they say, "What the hell?" So for the sake of your own goodness, you can't think in those ways.

What this means is that you notice what impact the sights, smells, sounds, tastes of the world have on you, and then learn to take in that data in a different way if it's having a bad impact. So it's not that you're not looking, it's just that you're looking with new eyes, with new motivations.

The Buddha recommends that when you're practicing restraint of the senses, you need a firm post. His analogy is of having six animals, each tied to a leash, and then tying the leashes all together. Now, if they're not tied to a firm post, the animals are going to pull in the different directions, and whichever animal is strongest is going to drag the rest along with it. If it's a crocodile, it'll pull all the animals—the dog, the bird, the snake, the hyena, and monkey—down into the water where they drown.

So you need a post. Tie all the leashes to a post, and no matter how much the animals pull, they're not going to get anywhere. They have to stay right there.

And it's the same with your six animals: your six senses. You need to tie the mind to the breath as a post. If you can make the breath nourishing, you're going to feel a lot less need to go out and nibble on unhealthy sights or sounds. You've got better food right here, just learning how to breathe in a way that seems most refreshing, most gratifying. What energy needs does your body have right now? Which parts of the body seem to be weak, which parts seem to be starved of energy? Well, give them a lot of breath. Or which ones, when you're breathing in and out, seem to be doing most of the work? Give them some energy too. Don't make them do the work for everybody else.

Learn to use the breath for its refreshment. Make it a point that wherever you are, whatever you're doing, you're going to breathe in a really refreshing way. Even when you're dealing with difficult people, difficult situations, breathe there in a refreshing way. You're not being a traitor to the other people. They may be suffering, but you can sit there and breathe in a comfortable way. You're not

betraying them. You're actually bringing good energy into the situation. You're making yourself stronger and so you can actually be more help to that other person.

All too often when someone else is suffering, we instinctively take on some of their suffering energy. But it's not helping them at all. We're not taking anything away from them, in the sense that we're not relieving them of their suffering energy. We're just adding more suffering to the situation.

So if you can learn how to breathe in a way that's really refreshing, take that skill wherever you go. That helps to build up the momentum that gets your practice on course. You're going to refind your footings, regain your bearings. This time around the foundation's going to be more solid. If things collapse again, go back and look at the foundation again. Because that's the part of the practice that really matters.

Ajaan Lee would often make the point that people are in much too great a hurry to go to what they think are the high level dhammas, while they tend to look down on the really basic things, like staying with the breath. Or just repeating a meditation word: People look down on that, too. But your ability to do that really well, is actually high level Dhamma. You get more and more alert, more and more precise, you develop more and more mindfulness when you really stick with the basics.

Think about the great scientists of the past. They're the ones who looked back at really basic assumptions and saw that there was something wrong. As a result, were able to totally reorganize people's knowledge by focusing on the basics.

It's the same with our practice. We can reorganize our practice, restart our practice when we go back and look at the basics very carefully. So if your practice is falling apart, take it as an opportunity to reorganize your practice and get it on a much more solid footing.