

Imperturbable

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Before the mind can settle down, you have to do a little housecleaning, to clean up the mind, clean up the body. Cleaning up the mind is putting it in the right mood with the right attitude so that it's ready to settle down and not pick up a lot of other issues. After all, you've got a whole hour here free to think about anything you want, and there will be a part of the mind, or many parts of the mind, that have other agendas. So we do the chanting to remind you that those agendas are not of any interest right now, not of any worth. Think about things of the past. They're gone. Things in the future—you don't really know what's going to happen, but you do know that the mind has to be well trained. And it's not going to be well trained by thinking about sights, sounds, smells, tastes, tactile sensations, ideas—which is what most of our thinking tends to be about. As it says in the discourse we chanted just now, to remind ourselves: These things burn away at the mind as long as there's greed, aversion, and delusion. Until you take care of the greed, aversion, and delusion, your thoughts of past and future tend to do nothing more than add more fuel to the fire.

Then you can remind yourself with the chants on the brahmaviharas that you do really want true happiness and you want a happiness that's good for everybody.

So the chants are there to clean out a lot of unskillful attitudes in the mind and to get you ready to settle down as you bring attention into the body. This is where you have to clean things out in the body a bit, because there is a tendency when you start focusing in on the body that the power of your focus pushes the blood around, interrupts the flow of energy, and gets very restrictive. It can be very uncomfortable. So the natural reaction is to run away, to leave the focus. You find yourself bouncing around the body quite a lot, or in the body and outside it.

So once you've got the right attitude that this is important, then the next thing you've got to do is to clean things out a little bit in the body; make sure that the energy's flowing well in different parts of the body. You can make your survey. Start down at the navel and move up the front of the body, over the top of the head, down the back, down the shoulders and the arms, down through the legs, out to the tips of the

toes. Try to loosen up all the areas of tightness so that you can begin to realize that getting your awareness centered is one thing, and the flow of energy in the body is something else. They may occupy the same space but they don't have to affect each other and, in particular, the movement of the mind in the center shouldn't squeeze things out.

It's as if your awareness and the body are on different wavelengths that don't have to interfere with each other, like the different radio signals going through the air. First make sure you're clearly aware of the movement of the energy in the body and that it's moving well. Then, as your awareness begins to settle down in whatever spot you've chosen, make sure that it doesn't offer any resistance to allowing that energy to move. When you can make this distinction, then it's a lot easier to settle down and just be here really solidly with a sense of genuine well-being.

And then what do you do when you're here? You remind yourself that this is a place you want to stay so can develop a skill: the skill of staying very, very still. Even though it may not seem like anything is happening, there are things happening. There are little stirrings here and stirrings there that, if you paid attention to them, would pull you away. And you're developing the skill of not getting pulled away.

There's a passage in the Vinaya where Ven. Moggallana's talking to some monks and saying that when he was in what they call the imperturbable concentration, sitting by the bank of a river, he heard the elephants in the river playing and trumpeting, splashing around and crossing over the river. The monks got upset. They didn't think that if he was in that concentration he'd be able to recognize those things, so they went to complain to the Buddha. And the Buddha said, "Actually, there is that concentration. It wasn't quite pure, but that does count as the imperturbable concentration."

There's a controversy around this: whether the monks were upset about Moggallana saying that he could hear the elephants or that he could recognize what the sounds were. The commentaries write about this and they say, basically, that the monks were upset because he could recognize the sounds. If you're in that concentration, it's not that you can't hear things. It's just that you don't move your mind out to take an interest in the sounds. When the mind is solid in this way, even large noises don't shake you.

So we're not trying to block out our ears here. It's simply a matter of not getting pulled away by any of the disturbances that would come up

—whether they're outside or inside; physical or mental. Just think of them exploding into nothingness, whereas your mind is solidly right here. That's the quality you want, this quality of solidity. And we're trying to make the mind solid, which is different from making the body solid. Some people will find that as the mind settles down, it does actually stiffen up the body, which is an effect of focusing too strongly on the earth element. This is one of the reasons why we go through the body first and straighten out the breath energy so it doesn't get unbalanced that way.

It's possible, when the mind settles in, that you find that you can't breathe. If it feels oppressive, that's a sign that you're using your awareness to squeeze the body. You don't want that. You want the awareness to settle in in the same place as the body, but not to squeeze anything in the body. Let the breath come and go freely. If it wants to settle down and stop, let it stop, but don't force it to. You apply force to the mind, but not to the breath. Learn how to make that distinction. It's an important one. You want the body to be light, open, but you want your mind to be solidly centered right here. Everything is focusing in here. The more you can maintain this focus and keep it solid, the more strength your concentration develops.

This comes from being able to clean things out as you remind yourself that nothing out there deserves your attention right now. You don't have any responsibilities to know anything about the world right now. You want to develop this skill of getting the mind really centered, gathering in, gathering in right here in a way that allows the body to feel at its ease and the mind to get unperturbed. If you allow it to get perturbed by things coming in through the senses, the Buddha said, it's like a cow with flayed skin being attacked by flies. It's constantly a matter of this little bite here, that little bite there, all the time, coming in from all directions: sight, sounds, smells, tastes, tactile sensations. They're all coming in all the time, all the time. And if you let them disturb you, it's like those caribou you see up in Alaska. The mosquitoes are getting them. They buck and they run and their bodies get contorted all over the place. That's the mind that leaves itself open to outside stimuli. We're not trying to block them out in the sense of not being able to hear them or sense their presence. But we are blocking them out in the sense that we just don't want to pay them any attention.

So if you find the mind going out to things outside, keep reminding yourself that there's nothing out there that will really nourish you. The nourishment lies in here. The problem actually lies in here: the voice that wants to go out; the impulse to go out. But if you don't look very carefully and steadily right here, you never see where the impulse comes from. You just sense its push, its movement, and you go along with it. But here we're trying to be imperturbable. Don't let yourself get fazed by anything. It's in this way that the mind develops strength.