

A Safe Haven Through Alertness

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One of the Pali terms for concentration is *vihāra-dhamma*, “a home for the mind.” It’s a place where you settle in and dwell with a sense of peace, security, well-being. And as we all know, it takes a heap of living to make a house a home. Sometimes it’s easy to settle down with the breath and sometimes it’s not. Even when you’ve settled down, there’s more work to be done. You don’t just move in and suddenly have a home.

You want to get well acquainted with what the breath can do and the various types of breath in the body. There’s the in-and-out breath, there’s the breath flowing through all the different parts of the body. And as Ajaan Lee points out, it’s that second one that you really want to work with. The first one is there to lasso you into the present moment, and then, when you’re here, you begin to sense some of the more subtleties of the breath: down your back, down your arms, in your hands, your feet, around the head deep into the brain. There are lots of places where the breath energy can flow, and the more you know about the breath energy, the more you’re acquainted with it, then the easier it is to settle in. It becomes a way of occupying the whole body with a sense of well-being. This is important because you need a safe place. You want to be able to put wheels on this home and make it mobile.

That way, it’s not only while you’re sitting here with your eyes closed, but when you get up there’s still a sense of your filling the body, as you walk around, as you deal with other people. Even as you leave the monastery, you want to be able to take this with you. After all, it is your breath and it’s always right here. But the sense of being able to occupy the whole body and be at ease here: That’s can take some work.

But it’s well worth the work, because as we live in the world and deal with other people, we’re dealing with their energies. If there’s a part of the body that’s not occupied, then other people can occupy it with their energy, whether they’re consciously doing it or not. You feel invaded; you don’t feel quite safe. And if you’re not safe in your own body, there’s really no place where you can be safe. So you’ve got to learn how to settle in and how to have a sense of being centered in one spot in the body but have your range of awareness fill the whole body.

When the Buddha talks about the mind settling into concentration, he says it’s like a bathman. Back in those days they didn’t use soap. They used a bath powder that they then mixed with water to turn it into a kind of dough, and then you scrubbed yourself with the dough. And, just as when you’re making bread, you wanted to make sure that there wasn’t any leftover water dripping outside and there weren’t any dry spots in the ball of powder, either. So when there’s a sense of well-being that comes with the breath, you want to think of it just spreading out: either radiating out in a kind of a nice sphere through the body, or going down the different nerves, blood vessels—whatever works for you. After all, this is your home, and

the way you relate to your breath energy is something very personal and very individual.

The instructions can just give you some general ideas of what might work, but you want to explore, and as you explore you want to use this quality of alertness. That's an important part of establishing mindfulness.

As Ajaan Lee points out, alertness looks in two directions. On the one hand, you focus on the object of your concentration. On the other hand, you have to focus on your own mind to see how it's relating to the object. Because sometimes you find that the breath just doesn't want to get comfortable, and then you can ask yourself, "Well, maybe the problem isn't with the breath, maybe it's with the attitude I'm bringing to it." So you want to turn around and look how your mind is having an effect on the breath. This is very important throughout the meditation, to get the mind and the breath together, or the mind and whatever-its-object together. You want to be able to look in both directions.

So if you're bringing impatience into the practice, you want to note that. Just say, "Okay, whatever the impatience is, I can drop that now." And having at least some sense of ease with the breath makes it easier to drop the attitude of impatience. Other times, you have to reason with yourself, telling yourself that impatience doesn't accomplish anything.

Sometimes we feel that if we push, push, push, then things will go faster, but there are a lot of things in this world that don't respond well to pushing in that way, especially when the causes and effects are delicate, as they are with the breath and with the mind. In cases like that, you want to bring a more nurturing attitude, to be willing to sit with things as they develop slowly. It's not the case that we're just accepting things as they are and leaving them that way. We're accepting them as they are with the purpose of figuring out the best way to develop them in the right direction. That will depend a lot on them, not just on our own sense of wanting them to move fast.

It's like growing rice or any kind of plant. You want the plant to be a certain height because you know when it gets that tall it's going to bear fruit or grains. But all you've got is this little tiny, tiny plant in the ground. What are you going to do? If you pull on it to stretch it and make it tall, you're going to kill it. You'll pull it out by the roots and that'll be the end of the plant. You have to learn either from observing on your own or from what other people have told you from what they've done in the past, what nourishes a plant. In this case, the plant needs water and sun, and it needs you to make sure that you take the bugs off it. Then it'll grow on its own at its own pace. Your duty is simply to make sure that the causes are continually there.

In other words, picking off the bugs means picking off any unskillful attitudes in the mind. You look at them and regard them as something separate. Impatience is there. Okay impatience is there, but you're aware of the impatience, which means there's an awareness there, too. They're two different things. See if you can side with the awareness and just let the impatience go.

As I said, sometimes this depends on having a sense of ease with the breath. It calms things

and soothes the roughness of your nerves. Sometimes it requires that you reason with yourself that this is a process that takes time and there's nothing wrong with you as a person because it's taking time. This is just the way things are.

As both sides get more and more congenial with each other, then they come together more easily. There comes a time, actually, when the awareness and the breath appear to be one. Wherever there's awareness in the body, there's breath; wherever there's breath in the body, there's awareness. That's when they fit together nicely, but to get them that way requires some adjusting: adjusting the breath, and turning around to look at the mind to see where it needs adjusting there. Fortunately, you're working in a very small circle here, so it's not too much work, just looking back and forth between these two things. Bit by bit by bit they come together.

Some people have found that it helps, if focusing on one spot is not working, you say, "Okay, I'm going to focus on two spots at once." That puts the mind in a position where it has to connect the two. Say you focus on the middle of your head and the tip of your tailbone, and you're right in the middle between them. See if that works. There are lots of different things you can try, and you'll find, after a while, what works for you.

Again, this is your home and you can decorate it anyway you like. Whatever feels at ease in the mind and feels at ease in the body is an important quality of concentration. You need this sense of well-being. Without it, the concentration is always on edge. You can be focused, but it's on edge. When the mind is on edge like that, it's going to leave as quickly as it can. If you turn around look back, and Ow, it's gone. So you try to get the mind and the breath to fit with each other happily, so that they can stay together for a long time.

So ask yourself right now, "What kind of breathing would you like?" You might decide you'd like heavy breathing for a bit, but then after a while that gets tiresome, so you say, "Let's calm it down a bit." You may like calm breathing, but it turns out sometimes that it's putting you to sleep, so you have to make adjustments. In other words, it's not entirely up to your taste at the moment. It's more and more that you're learning how to read the situation.

To make another comparison, it's like trying to become friends with someone. On the one hand, you want a friend with whom you can just do as you like and you both enjoy each other's company, but even with the best of friends you realize there are some things you have to be very careful about. The friend may be touchy about certain subjects, so you work around them, keeping in mind the fact that this is a good friend or can potentially be a very good friend, so you put up with the friend's peculiarities a bit.

In other words, you'll find there are times when you can't force the breath in a particular way and if you force it too much, you're going to get a headache or pains in your spine or a stomachache. So learn how to read what the breath needs, read what the body needs in terms of the breath, read what kind of breath the mind can settle down with right now. As you get more and more familiar with this territory, it becomes more and more yours, and it's your safe

place. Because you find that within this territory, you're not the only one here. You've got the voices of all kinds of other people as well and you don't want them to take over.

Sometimes you find yourself identifying with a particular voice in the mind but you stop and look at it you realize, "Oh, that's somebody else," something you picked up from the past. If you otherwise have a sense of well-being in the present, you can look at that voice and say, "I don't have to go there. I don't have to take that on."

As this space becomes more and more your space, your mind becomes more and more your mind, as both body and mind learn how to get together, stay together with a sense of well-being for both. And as you develop this ability to look in both directions, you find it's very useful all the way down the path. Something comes up in the mind, something comes up in the meditation, and the mind will have a comment on it, or the mind will have an attitude, or something will come up and you want to be able to notice that.

In fact, that's why we're focusing on the various topics of concentration, because we want to learn about the mind. And the Buddha points out there are times when you can hit something really good but the mind's attitude toward it is not right, that spoils the attainment. So you have to look both ways all along.

So try to develop this quality of alertness. It's what helps you to settle down, helps you to stay settled down, and helps make whatever concentration you've developed really solid. It becomes more and more a skill. As it develops, you develop both the breath and the mind, in the sense of being at home right here. This is your area and it's very solid, very strong. When you come from a position of strength, it's a lot easier to deal with the difficulties of life.

So bring the mind and the body into alignment, because when they're aligned they become allies. When they're allies, they strengthen each other. Each becomes the other's safe haven.