

A Post for the Heart

January 15, 2015

One of the Thai terms for a mind that has really good, firm, reliable principles inside is that the heart has a post. This relates to the way buildings are built in Thailand. A house is built up on stilts, but the first thing you've got to put up is the first post. Once that post is in place, then you can put everything else up together. And everything leans on that first post.

Or you can take Ajaan Lee's image of a post planted at the edge of the sea. The water rises, but the post doesn't rise with the water. The water subsides, but the post doesn't go out with the tide. You want your mind to be firmly planted like that.

This is what we try to develop as we develop the mind in concentration and also with the practice of virtue and generosity—a good solid post in the mind. If the mind isn't firmly planted like this, it's like a post that's just lying there on the beach. The water rises, and the post gets washed up with the water and washed back out. It gets worn down, and it can crash into other people, breaking their arms and legs.

So try to make your mind firmly planted here in the present moment and think about what principles you have. The world undergoes lots of changes. Like that chant we had just now: The body ages, grows ill, and dies, and we get separated from the people and the things we love. These are the basic principles. And a lot of times, they get worked out in really unexpected ways.

So what do we have inside that's really firm? Well, part of it's our conviction that our actions are what really matter, and that we can learn how to develop a refuge inside so we don't need to depend on things being a certain way. If this has to be that way, and that has to be this way, the mind is really weak. You should instead want a mind that's able to live with lots of different possibilities without abandoning its principles. All too many people think, "Well, Buddhism is okay about change, so why couldn't we just change the Dhamma, change the teachings to suit us? What's wrong with that?" It's because you'd be left with nothing to depend on at all.

The whole purpose of the teaching is to give you something solid you can really depend on. This is what the Buddha saw as his primary responsibility. When he taught about action, he said that if you believe that everything is determined from the past and nothing can be changed, you're left without a refuge. If you believe that everything is random, you're left without a refuge. In other words, you can't

really figure out what you should and shouldn't do. This is what it means to have a refuge: to have a reliable sense of what you should and shouldn't do—or at least to give the mind a way of figuring those things out.

To see the best way to act, you have to hold to the principle that no matter what the situation is, there's a skillful way of dealing with it. And even if you can't figure out what is *the* most skillful way of dealing with a situation, you want to go with what seems to be the most skillful thing you can think of. And if you have trouble thinking of something that might be skillful—in other words, that doesn't involve any breaking of the precepts and doesn't involve harming yourself or others—then you step back. This is one of the gifts of meditation: It gives you a place to step back and just observe, to put down your preconceived notions, watch, and feel secure in the watching.

With something as simple as the breath: When people ask what we meditate on here, we say the breath, and nobody asks, "What is that?" And yet, as you get to know it, you begin to realize there's a lot going on in the breath that you may not have expected. So you've got to learn how to be okay with that. As we were saying today, sometimes you have to just step back and allow things to happen.

You come to see that when you're trying to connect the breath or spread the breath, there are times when all you have to do is just think about it and it'll happen. You don't have to push; you don't have to squeeze. You don't have to force things. It's because you have an attitude where you can step back and watch: That's how you learn. This applies inside. It applies to things outside as well.

Ajaan Maha Boowa has a really nice passage where he talks about how when Ajaan Mun passed away, he felt lost. He'd lost his post: the person he could rely on. Then he stopped to think, "Well, what was it that Ajaan Mun kept saying whenever I came to him with an issue?" And one of his constant teachings was that if something comes up and you're not really sure as to whether it's reliable or not, just stay with your sense of awareness. In some cases, that may help you see things about it that you didn't realize before and might have missed otherwise. In other cases, it'll simply pass on its own and not be any danger.

It's good to have this attitude that "If I don't understand, I'll step back, question my assumptions, and feel secure in the stepping back." All too often, we make a mess of situations because we feel, "Well, this has to be that way," or "This should be this way." And our sense of needing things to be that way gets in the way. Or we feel we have to arrive at a decision *right now*, even though we don't know what to do. This is not to say that all preconceived notions are bad. What's bad is our sense of needing things to be a certain way: That's what gets in the way.

This is one of the other things we develop as we meditate: a sense of being sufficient inside. You've got the breath. You've got your awareness. You've got the skills that go around breath and awareness. They can give the mind the stability to see things more clearly, the strength to follow through on what we know is skillful or what we see is skillful, and the ability to make sacrifices.

That's another thing that gets in the way of our doing the skillful thing: our fear of making sacrifices. We have to remember that our skillful actions are our true wealth, not our wealth outside. When a situation outside has to be this way or has to be that way, our sense of needing that: That's poverty.

So we can learn how to question a lot of our sense of what we really need in order to have a sense of well-being. In this way, we can live in a world that can often change in ways that we don't expect. People we rely on suddenly abandon us. They get old; they get weak. We get old; we get weak. People around us change. Society changes. The economy changes. The climate changes. And as they say with climate change, it's not just that things are gradually warming up in every way. The weather goes through wild swings—extreme hot, extreme cold, floods, droughts—and that's the way it is with human life. There are a lot of wild swings back and forth. But we want to be in the middle of the swings without getting pushed around.

Another one of the post images from the Pali Canon is of a well-trained mind like a post of solid rock, sixteen spans tall, with eight spans buried in the ground, so that no matter which direction the winds come blowing from—whether from gain or loss, status, loss of status, praise, criticism, pleasure, or pain—the post isn't moved.

Now, the difference, of course, is that the mind isn't rock. It's aware. But you can make your awareness solid like rock. You can see the things come but you don't have to be shaken by them because you have an inner sense of well-being, an inner sense of strength, an inner sense of refuge and skill. That's your true wealth.

Try to protect your true wealth. As for anything else that's not your true wealth, you may find that you have to let it go. There are lots of things we have to let go of in this life. But this inner post is something that's going to see you all the way through.