

The Mind Comes First

June 21, 2015

The first verse in the Dhammapada—“All things are preceded by the mind”: It’s good to take that seriously. You’re sitting right here, right now, with the body, the mind, and the breath. Put the mind first. Otherwise, you find yourself getting worked up because the breath doesn’t seem to be the way you want it to be, or the body isn’t the way you want it to be. There’re pains here, pains there, and instead of taking the mind as the forerunner, you take other things as forerunners. The pains become the given, and then you respond to the pains, you react to the pains. It’s the same with the breath—the pains are like a wall here and there, and there’s the question of how to get the breath through that wall.

We tend to forget that our first experience of the body, the most primary experience of the body, is energy. This is how the mind makes contact with the body: through that sense of energy. So think of the energy as prior to the solid parts, and prior to the pains. In other words, you can work with the energy and not be too concerned about how the pains are responding or how they’re not responding as quickly as you want them. You just keep working with the energy.

The same with the state of mind: Try to create what Ajaan Suwat would call a joyful and happy state of mind. You’re here meditating: You’re doing something good. He would often say, as you begin to meditate, to get the mind in a state where it has a sense of confidence, a sense of conviction, a sense of joy in what it’s doing. Keep that joy going regardless of how quickly or slowly the body seems to respond. “If the mind were to have a face,” he’d say, “have a smile on the face.” Or as they say in Thai, keep that smile in spite of the fact that you’re fighting with a tiger, and the smile can keep you going.

This doesn’t necessarily mean you have to slap a smile on your face right now, but try to have that attitude of being confident, being *glad* that you’re here meditating—not regarding it as a chore, and not getting upset when the results aren’t coming as quickly as you’d like.

If there are pains in the body, don’t make a big deal out of them. The physical pain in and of itself may be bad enough, but the mind can make it a lot worse. Often we can create pains in the body because we have the wrong attitude toward what we’re doing, trying to force things too much. Just maintain this attitude of goodwill for the mind, goodwill for the body, goodwill for whatever’s happening.

Keep the mind first. Keep the breath prior to the other elements in the body; keep the mind prior to the breath. The mind, remember, is quicker than the breath. The breath can be pretty fast. As soon as you breathe in, the breath energy has already started going all the way through the body. It's not the case that you have to start with one spot in the body and as you breathe in the breath gradually moves down to the bottom. As soon as you start breathing in, the breath energy has already gone throughout the nervous system. Keep the breath prior to the other elements. Keep the breath prior to the pain. Keep your mind prior to the breath. Keep this attitude going all the time.

This is something you have to keep in mind. Otherwise, the pain suddenly becomes a prior reality, and you find the mind just bouncing off it. When it bounces off, it tends to get in a bad mood. That gets things all worked up, because when the mind gets in a bad mood it becomes a forerunner for bad things in your experience right now. So here's a chance to test the mind with a minimum of interference from other people, other issues—just your experience of the body right here, right now.

When the Buddha talks about dependent co-arising, he puts intention prior to your sensory experience. He puts the activities of fabrication, including the breath, prior to your sensory experience. Again, we usually think of things coming in to the senses and then the mind responds. We forget the extent to which we're already going out *looking* for issues.

It's actually fortunate that that's the real problem, because if the problem came from the fact that there are bad things out there, how would you solve it? Go out and try to straighten out the world? The world is remarkably resistant to being straightened out. We can do our best to help here and help there, but you keep running up against the fact that a lot of things out there are totally beyond your control. People's actions are beyond your control. You can do what you can, hopefully, to influence them in the right direction, and one of the best ways of doing that is being a good example yourself, but you keep running into examples where people are resistant. The Buddha ran into people who were resistant, to say nothing of us.

Fortunately, the problem is not so much what's going on out there, it's what the mind brings to its experience—the fact that it's hungry. It keeps looking for food in various ways, often looking for food—and this can be physical food or emotional food—in all the wrong places. That's what we have to retrain. And because the mind is so intent on gobbling things down outside, it forgets that it's actually shaping a lot of these things. It's already cooking its experience.

That's good to know—that you can make yourself a better cook. You can bring the right attitude; bring the right recipe; bring the right skills to your

experience. Even when things are pretty bad, you can still make something good out of them.

So remember: The breath is prior to everything else in the body; the mind is prior to the breath. This often requires a reordering of your understanding of what's going on. You have to keep reminding yourself, again and again. The first thing to do when you find things are not going well in the meditation is to step back for a bit, check the mood of the mind, and remind yourself that you're here doing something good, something blameless. You're exercising some freedom of choice, so freely choose to make things as good as you can in the mind, and then apply that good mind state to whatever problems are presenting themselves here. You'll find that they're a lot easier to take.

When the breath starts getting comfortable, that helps to nourish the state of mind; and when the breath can start working through pains in the body, you begin to get a sense of accomplishment. That perception of the mind coming first then gets easier and easier to hold on to. In the beginning, it requires some willpower to reorder things in your sense of what's going on; but when you find that it really works, that things begin to click in this way, then you can deal with the world a lot more easily. The disappointments outside don't make inroads on you.

This is why the Buddha was able to teach people for 45 years. As he said, there were people who would listen and people who wouldn't listen. He wasn't satisfied when people wouldn't listen, but that didn't make inroads on his mind. He trained the mind to be *always* first.

Ajaan Lee has a nice image: He says you try to make the mind zero, and you put the zeros first. They don't add any problems. If the mind comes after other things, then even zeros can create hundreds, thousands, millions, all kinds of issues. But make the mind zero and put the zeros first, and it doesn't add anything on to things. It doesn't create any extra suffering.

So always keep the mind first. Even though there are things outside that you can't change, the fact that the mind is always coming first means that it's not going to get worked up. It has its independence. And it's by putting the mind first that we find true release.