

Staying Still

November 20, 2015

Respect for concentration: It's interesting that in that verse we chanted just now, there's a phrase, "respect for the training," and the training, of course, covers virtue, concentration, and discernment. Then it comes back and emphasizes "respect for concentration."

The Buddha wants you to realize that this stillness of mind, this ability for the mind to just settle down and be still, requires extra respect because people tend to be very easily bored with it. You're sitting here not thinking about much and you're wondering, "How dull can this get? How stupid can I get?" Then you find yourself running off someplace else, and you've ruined whatever stillness you had.

You've got to learn how to appreciate it: the ability to get the mind to settle down and stay settled down.

Ajaan Fuang would talk about the distinction between learning how to do the concentration and learning how to maintain it. In other words, getting the mind focused with the breath is doing it. Staying focused with the breath is the maintaining. The maintaining is a different skill.

The first skill is coming out of the noise and into the stillness. In some cases, that requires nothing more than just reminding yourself that you'd like to be with the breath—and there it is. Other times, you have to think your way here, cut your way through the vines of the mind: its attachment to this, that, and the other thing.

This is why, in the section on concentration in Ajaan Lee's book on mindfulness, he talks a lot about developing a sense of samvega as an important element in getting the mind to settle down. In other words, you look at the things that would pull you out and you see there's nothing much there. Issues of the body, issues of the world: The world is swept away. The body's composed of all kinds of parts, none of which you would particularly want to identify with if you had to choose which part in the body for which you'd genuinely say, "This is me, this is mine." The important element there is the samvega, the sense of dispassion for these things, so that the mind can disengage from them at least temporarily. Get the mind to be willing to let go and just stay with the breath.

Those reflections are really good because they'll be there to warn you if you ever get tempted to say, "Well, that's enough stillness, let's go think about something else." How much stillness is really enough? You keep reading about people saying, "How little stillness can you get away with?" Why would you want

to get away with the minimum? Why not learn how to go for the maximum and be able to indulge in it?

You hear people talk about the dangers of stillness, the dangers of concentration, as if they were something you'd best avoid with a wide berth. But actually, as the Buddha said, they're central to the path. This is not a sevenfold path, it's an eightfold path. And the biggest fold of all is right concentration.

So take some time to appreciate the fact that you can get the mind to settle down. Then see what's required to keep it settled down. This is where you have to fend off the mind's impatience, its desire for entertainment, its desire for all kinds of things, the arguments that come out and say, "Well, now you've got all this free time. You can plan that meal you were thinking about or you can plan that book or you can plan that project you were thinking about." And you have to say, "No. This is more important." This stillness does require some respect and appreciation. After all, if you're going to be dealing with the defilements, one, you have to be able to see them, and two, you need something to fall back on when they start making claims.

In other words, you need a sense of pleasure. As the Buddha said, you can't get past sensuality without having a pleasure like this or higher. You can remember all you've read about the dangers of sensual desire, the dangers of anger or whatever, but those things have an immediate gratification, and when you're fighting them off you need something more than just memories of what you've read to provide an alternative gratification. So it's good to learn how to work with the breath, play with the breath, so that you can get an immediate sense of ease and gratification inside.

Ajaan Fuang would often talk about the need for play in the concentration. It's one of the ways that you can get past being bored with being still. You can play with the breath energies. You can play with the elements in the body. In other words, if you're feeling heavy, what would lighten your sense of the body right now? What sensations in the body already there are already light? Focus on those. If you're feeling cold, what sensations are already warm? Focus on those. See what happens.

As for the lightness or heaviness of the body, there are times when you really get sensitive to the breath and you can notice: When you breathe in, there's a feeling that the energy is going up in the body. If you get too much of that, you can develop the symptom that Hakuin called "Zen sickness": in other words, a tightness and sense of pressure in the head. Well, just learn how to reverse it. Think, when you breathe in, that everything's coming down, coming down from the top of the head, going down, down, down, kind of melting down. That'll

lower the tension.

You can go through the body and try to notice: Is there any tension that you can release? Any tension around your wrists, your ankles, your elbows, your shoulders? Any place where the joints are coming together? If you have trouble seeing what's tense and what's not, see if you can compare your left side with your right side. How about your left hand and your right hand? Your left wrist and your right wrist? Forearms, elbows. Upper arms, shoulders. Then start down with the feet and work your way up the legs. Compare one side to the other and if you can see that one side has more tension than the other, let it go. Release the tension if you can. Then watch it as you breathe in, breathe out, and notice: Does the tension come back when you breathe in? If it does, think of what you can do to release that.

There are a lot of sensations in the body that you can play with. As you get interested in playing with them, you find you can get a sense of greater and greater well-being, a greater sense of lightness.

You can very deliberately erase some of the perceptions you're holding in mind about where the body is, what's wrong with it right now, what its shape is. The whole question of having a surface: Just think of the body as a mist of little sensation points with no surface. Hold that perception in mind.

What you're doing as you play with these perceptions is that you get more and more absorbed in the sensation of the body from within. The pleasure you gain from that is a lot less dangerous than the desire you may have for sensual pleasures.

Those warnings about the dangers of jhana are really misplaced. As the Buddha said, the one danger of jhana is that you get there and you don't want to go anywhere else. Now, compare that with the dangers of sensuality. People kill over sensual desire, there are fights within a family over sensual desire, fights between families, fights between nations, all the work you have to do in order to gain sensual pleasures: That's really dangerous.

Then there are the dangers of trying to skip concentration and going straight to insight and getting certified with this or that level. The sense of pride totally closes off any possibility of gaining any progress.

So concentration is a safe place to be. The stillness of mind is a safe place to be.

There's that nice passage in Ajaan Maha Boowa where he's talking about when Ajaan Mun passed away. He was sitting there contemplating: Now that his teacher was gone, what was he going to do? He felt like a wild animal in the forest with no doctor to look after his diseases. Then he thought of some of the things that Ajaan Mun had taught him. One of them was: If anything comes up in the

mind that you're not sure of, whether it's something you should go with or not, just stay with the sense of awareness, the knower inside.

In other words, don't commit to anything. Just be aware, aware, aware. And still. And watch. Maybe you'll see exactly where there's something wrong with that event in the mind. Or if you can't figure it out, at least it'll pass. You won't jump to any conclusions about it.

So this aware stillness is a safe place to be.

Think of those images in the Canon of the quail caught by the hawk. It wandered away from the field where it ordinarily stayed, and the hawk swooped down and got it. As it was being carried off, the quail lamented, "Oh, if only I had stayed in my ancestral territory, this hawk would have been no match for me!"

That irritated the hawk. He said, "Well, where's your ancestral territory?"

The quail said, "A field newly plowed with all the stones turned up."

So the hawk let him go, and said, "Okay, go there. But even there, you won't escape me."

So the quail goes down and stands on a stone and starts taunting the hawk, "Come and get me, you hawk! Come and get me, you hawk!"

The hawk folds his wings and swoops down on the quail. And just as the quail sees the hawk coming at him at full speed, he hides behind a stone, and the hawk shatters his breast on the stone.

The field, as the Buddha said, stands for the four establishings of mindfulness. Outside of the field stands for your immersion in sensual pleasures, what he calls the five strings of sensuality: enticing sights, sounds, smells, tastes, and tactile sensations.

Stillness is your safe place. If you go out looking for sensual pleasures, they pull you further and further afield and get you in all kinds of danger. Whereas if the mind is really still, it's safe from a lot of things, and it's in a position where it can see things a lot more clearly.

So have some respect for your concentration. Have some respect for whatever stillness you can develop in the mind, even if it's stillness in the midst of a chattering mind. It is possible even then to find some spot with the breath where things feel still. Even though the mind isn't settling down yet, at least you can be still there watching, waiting, to let things calm down. As the stillness inside gets more and more dominant, then you can start indulging in it.

Play with the sensations, play with your perceptions. So enjoy being here.

One way of playing with your perceptions is that if you have a pain that seems to be in the front of the body, ask yourself, "What if it's actually in the back, and I've mislabeled it? How about relabeling it and see what that does."

Then there's the whole issue about how you're sitting here. If your eyes were open, you'd be facing forward. Now you close your eyes: Why do you have a forward and a back in the mind? Forward and back are an affair of the body. Can you erase that perception of forward and back in the mind? You notice that the perception will come up and you'll ordinarily go with it. But now you have the choice. You can say, "I don't need that perception right now. I can drop it."

It's playing around like this that you learn a lot about the aggregates, you learn about all the things that you need to know to gain insight. But you play around with them in the stillness. When you're tired of playing, you just rest and *be* right here. It's a good place to be. It's a part of the training.

As the Buddha said, it's the heart of the path, in the sense that all the other factors of the path are its requisites, the things that right concentration uses.

So right here is where you want to be. And you want to learn how to dis-identify with any voices that would say, "This is getting boring. This isn't interesting." One way to respond is to be stubborn and just not listen to the voices. The other way is to say, "Well, I actually can create a sense of well-being here. I can create a sense of interest in being here." Use your imagination. There are lots of potentials here in the present moment.

The Buddha talks about what he calls properties, *dhatu*. There are physical properties, there are also properties of the mind that, when they're provoked, will give rise to events in the mind or the body. When they're not provoked, they go back into stillness. To what extent are you provoking things that you don't even realize you're provoking? Certain patterns of thought, patterns of perception that you just keep repeating over and over again: Can you catch yourself doing this and say, "Well, what if I stop doing that? What would happen?" There are also other properties, good properties, that you've never tried to provoke before. Try to provoke them and see what happens. There's plenty to play with here.

And as when you're learning a musical instrument, sometimes just playing around with it teaches you how to be really good at playing it. Playing around with the breath teaches you a lot of things you're going to need to know, not only about the breath but also about the mind.

So do what you can to get absorbed in the breath. And appreciate the stillness, *long* periods of stillness. It's good for the body and good for the mind. There's a sense of well-being that goes with it that nourishes you in your fight against the defilements. And because of the stillness, you can actually see them. You can see what's going on.

As Ajaan Fuang said to one of his students, this is the foundation, and you want to make sure the foundation is strong. So don't worry about how long you're

spending with it. When the time comes to build the storeys on top of the foundation, you don't have to be afraid about their falling down.

Make this solid, steady and secure, because everything else will depend on this.