

Fully Absorbed

August 2, 2016

We recite the chant on the brahmaviharas to tie up our loose ends with the world of beings—particularly the beings that we’ve had dealings with today or in our family. We want to bring those narratives to a nice close—or at least bring the narratives to the fact that you’re meditating. You’re meditating in the context of those narratives because you want beings to be happy. You want to develop the skills so that you can be equanimous in areas where you can’t make a difference in the world. You want to think in those ways, because while you’re meditating on the breath, other narratives do come up. The brahmaviharas are for reminding yourself that the narratives come back here. Everything should be focused in here right now.

So if you think of somebody—somebody’s face appears in your mental eye—wish them goodwill. Remind yourself, if you really have goodwill for that person, you really have goodwill for yourself, you come back here to the breath. Because giving the breath your total attention is the path to finding a happiness that causes no one any harm.

And you’re looking at things in a different framework. As the Thai ajaans often like to say, when you’re sitting here with your eyes closed, there is no man, there is no woman, there is no being, there is no race, there is no ethnic identity. There’s just awareness and the breath. You want to keep everything on that level, so that you can get used to looking at your awareness on that level, and see what’s going on at the level: how those ideas of world and beings and whatnot get created, how they take hold of the mind. You also want to see how you can have an area of the awareness that lies beyond them, has nothing to do with them. It’s just you... Not even you. It’s just awareness with the breath.

There will be a “you” running the show for a while. Make it one whose interest is just in being with the awareness—totally with the awareness, totally with the breath. Don’t go casting your eyes down the path to what comes next. The Zen master Dogen has a nice comment. He says that the development of the path is the same thing as the realization of cessation. Often that’s taken out of context,

where people say he's saying that the path is the goal. That's not what he's saying. He's saying that the activity of developing the path is the same as the activity of realizing cessation. Which means you don't look anywhere else. As you develop concentration on the breath, there in the act of developing concentration things are going to open up.

So don't keep casting one eye down to the end of the path. Cast all your gazes right here at the breath. Give it your full attention. In fact, you don't even have to listen to this Dhamma talk. It's here as a fence, so that if the mind leaves the breath, it runs into the fence and turns back. Remember the quality of jhana. The word *jhayati*, which is the verb related to the word jhana, has two meanings. One, it means *to do jhana*. Two, it means *to burn*, but to burn with a steady flame, unlike other verbs for burning in Pali, which can apply to bonfires and other fires with unsteady flames. This is a steady flame you want to develop.

In fact, at one point the Buddha compares this to the brahmanical practice of stoking the inner fire. You probably know that in the Upanishads they'd talk about the fire sacrifices, saying that they're really referring to the fire inside. And the Buddha says, that's precisely what we're doing with the concentration. It's our fire inside. I was reading a scholar who had commented how peculiar it was that the Buddha, who usually talks about putting out fires, was here talking about stoking a fire. That's because *jhayati* is *to meditate* and is also *to burn with a steady flame*, the kind of flame by which you can read a book, by which you can see things clearly. Not the kind of flame that leaps around, casts weird shadows on the wall, flickers a lot, and makes it hard to read.

You want to read your mind by the light of this cool fire, as Ajaan Lee calls it: the cool fire of jhana, *ghanaggi*. So make it a steady flame. Tend to it as you would to any kind of fire. In the beginning, it's going to be small, so you protect what small concentration you have, what small focus you have, until it catches and it's strong enough. Then you can think of it spreading out. Find a spot where you can stay focused and think of protecting it, cupping it with your hands from all the distractions outside. And wait till it takes. When it takes, then you can let it spread—the sense of ease that develops, the sense of well-being that develops from the steadiness of your focus.

In Pali they use the word *piti*, which is often translated as *rapture*. Sometimes it's that strong; sometimes it's not—it's more simply a sense of refreshment. You feel cool, refreshed, just sitting here. There's a cool fire. When you spread it, you don't have to push it. Just think of the mind allowing the fire to spread, as it spreads down the lines of your veins and the lines of your nerves, out to every pore. Then do your best to maintain it.

Both Ajaan Lee and Ajaan Fuang would talk about three stages: You do it and then you maintain it and then you use it. The maintaining is a special skill. You have to learn not to give in to the voices that say, "Okay, that's enough of that, now it's time to move on." Or "What's next? I'm on a path and this is just one step in the path, so what's next?" Say, "No, you have to develop this."

Think of Ajaan Chah's image. The path is like a mango. You don't go anywhere with the mango. The mango just sits there, but it ripens. So you've got to stay right here as your concentration ripens. You get accustomed to the fact that this is where you're going to stay. This is where the real work is done. This is where things are going to open up. Give it your full attention. Develop what you've got here; let it ripen. And if that voice comes up again, you have to just drop it again.

Because a centered mind is something that's really valuable on the path. It's an important skill. You may have noticed that in the chant we recited last night on the factors of the path, the description of right concentration is by far the longest of the descriptions and the most varied, as you go through one stage and then the next and the next. But where are the stages? They're all right here. They differ simply in the intensity and the efficiency with which you relate to the breath.

In the beginning it's not quite so efficient: You've got to adjust this, adjust that; remind yourself to come back, remind yourself to come back; work with the pleasure, work with the sense of refreshment that comes from the breath. There's a fair amount of work to do in the first stage.

Then, when you're really there, you can drop a lot of that work and just be with the sensation of the breath. Think of the awareness and the breath becoming one. They both fill the body together. You don't have to do any adjusting at that point. You're just right here with it. And you stay. Part of the mind will say, "Well, this is dumb," and you have to say, "No, this is not dumb. This is a skill."

And it'll argue; it'll say, "I've got to think of things, analyze things." Not yet. The first step is to develop this.

Because as this state of the mind is developed, insights will come. Now, there are three ways of doing it. Sometimes they just come on their own. Other times, you pose or ask a question in the mind, and an answer will come. Other times you have to do a little more active analysis. But in any of those cases, whether the insight comes unbidden or because you asked, you can't fully trust it. Just because something arises in a still mind doesn't mean it's necessarily true. You've got to test it.

The best insights are the ones that are relevant to what you're doing right now. If you feel blocked, you can ask yourself, "Where's the blockage?" If you're feeling ill at ease, what's causing that? If you're anxious, what's causing the anxiety, what can you do to drop that? And see what comes. Don't do too much analysis, just pose the question and see if an answer comes. And if an answer comes, then you say, "Okay, in what way would this be useful? What do I do with this?"

Sometimes the insights that come are about the nature of the world or the nature of reality. Drop those for the time being. You want to know: What's the nature of my concentration? And how can it be improved? Those are the questions that are really relevant right now, the ones focused on what you're doing. Those are the ones whose answers you can actually put to use.

As for other insights, if they're not really relevant to what you're doing right now, you just drop them. Don't be too amazed by them. Don't be too protective of them. They can very easily destroy your concentration. I know a lot of people want to have visions in their concentration, want to have insights appearing spontaneously. There's an interesting passage in Ajaan Lee where he treats these things as obstacles in the concentration. When they come, you have to learn a way to deal with them so that they don't pull you out. You want to keep your frame of reference here with just breath and awareness. Make those the terms of your inquiry, because that's how you get in touch with the processes that are going on in your mind—which is where all the work is going to happen.

So be totally absorbed in what you're doing. As for where it's going to go or what the next step is, you don't think about it right now. Just get totally focused on this step. Because it's in allowing what you've got here to mature and grow:

That's what'll lead you down the path. It doesn't come from having a map in your hand and saying, "Okay, I know I've got this one," and you check that off and move on to the next item on the list. As with everything on the Buddha's lists, you don't really leave one factor to go to the next. You just add new factors to what you've got.

It's the same with the factors of the path. You start with right view, and then you're basically learning how to develop right view by developing the other factors. In this case, you're developing right view by learning how to concentrate the mind. And your skill and your awareness of what's happening adds more depth and detail to your right view.

As for when the insights come, again, you don't have to leave concentration. You don't have to leave the jhana. You can do the work right here. So be absorbed right here, right now. Get really into this frame of just awareness and the breath. For the time being, let the rest of the world go. And "world" here also includes your identity, your roles here in the world and all that. Just let them go. You're dealing with awareness and breath. That's all you have to take care of—because when you're really with this frame of reference, it'll take care of you.