

The Water in Your Cup

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Take a couple of good long deep in-and-out breaths. Think of the breath energy sweeping through the whole body, cleaning out all the cobwebs, cleaning out all the little corners where the energy tends to get stagnant. And if long breathing feels good, keep it up. If it feels tiring, then you can choose another rhythm: shorter, more shallow, faster, slower, heavier, lighter. Try to see what your body needs right now. Don't get tied down by the perception that when you're meditating, the breath has to be gentle or shallow or whatever for there to be concentration. You can concentrate on all kinds of breathing. But you want to listen to what your body needs right now.

Pay close attention. This way you get to see things you didn't see before inside, both in the body and in the mind. Because as the mind begins to gather around the breath like this, and you give it one thing to stick with, you begin to see other movements in the mind: other intentions that may come up, other thoughts referring to the past, referring to the future. You tend not to notice them unless you're telling yourself, "Okay, I've got to be here in the present moment." Otherwise, you just ride around with them. If you were to see a map of where the mind went over the course of a day, it would be all over the place. It would be tangled more than a bird's nest. And if you were asked to draw that map, you'd be at a loss. When you went from one thought to the next, what was the transition?

But when you're sitting here meditating, you can see the thoughts come, you can see them go—not that you want to get interested enough to draw the map, but just realize that you're in a better position now, outside of the thoughts. That's one of the purposes of the meditation: to step outside of this constant chatter inside. And you do that at first, of course, by talking to yourself about the breath, asking yourself, "Is it comfortable? If it's not comfortable, what could be done to make it more comfortable? If it is comfortable, how do you protect it?" Those are legitimate things to be asking. But they also require that you be very attentive.

You probably know the story about the overflowing cup. Someone goes to the Zen master and he's full of opinions. The Zen master starts pouring tea into the cup. And he keeps pouring and pouring and pouring. It's overflowing. And finally the visitor says, "Wait a minute. Why do you keep pouring tea into the cup? It's already full." The Zen master says, "In the same way, if I were to try to teach you, it would be like pouring water into a cup that's already full."

Ajaan Chah added that the tea already in the cup is probably dirty. People come, he says, with opinions, and it's as if their cups are filled with dirty water. One of the first things you've got to do is throw it out. Well, this doesn't apply just to our opinions when we're listening to the Dhamma. We go through the day with our cups full of water. Sometimes it is dirty water. In other words, we bring a lot of things to our encounters with other people, and simply our encounters with the sights, sounds, tastes, smells, tactile sensations, and what we bring often makes things worse. Even clean water poured into a cup of dirty water gets dirty, too.

When the Buddha set out the factors for dependent co-arising, he noticed that sensory contact happens in the middle of the factors, which means a lot of things happen beforehand. And it's easy to get entangled in the details of dependent co-arising to miss the point that what the Buddha is saying is that you're suffering is because of what you bring to your experience of the world.

We bring a full cup, often full of dirty water. That's why we don't like drinking the water, because it's not clean. So we've got to learn to pour it out and just stay with the sensation of the breath and simple sensations in the present moment. See how much you can pare down your conversation around that. As the breath gets more and more comfortable, it's easier to pare things down. So focus on that. Make that your purpose in being here right now: to find a way of breathing that feels really good. And if you can think of that sense of well-being then spreading from whatever spot you focused on, you get more and more anchored in the present.

As things begin to calm down in the body, it has a soothing effect on the mind. The chatter can get more and more subtle. And it's when your chatter gets more subtle that you can see the other thoughts that are there. Sometimes they hide out while you're in concentration. You have to wait until you're coming out to catch the fact that as soon as you leave the breath, you're going to jump on something else. And you've already got a story prepared for it. So you have to learn how to question those stories.

This is not saying that the world outside doesn't have bad things or truly bad people. We're not here to assign blame as to who's right and who's wrong; who's good or who's bad. The question is: Who's skillful? Are you skillful in handling all the difficulties of the world? This is something you can do something about. If you try to straighten out the whole world before you sit down to meditate and before you've worked on your mind, nothing would ever get straightened out because a lot of people would resist your ideas of how they should be.

But if you focus inside, that's something you can do something about. Again, this is not assigning blame. It's simply saying this is the most effective place to

solve the problem. That's when you find that the problem really is the suffering you create for yourself. There's stress out there in the world, but that's just part of the world. The stress that weighs you down is what you take on by feeding on things. Again, this is a lot of what we bring to a situation. Our repeated question is, "What can I feed on? What can I feed on? Where can I get some pleasure here?" And then when we're disappointed in not getting the pleasure we wanted, we get upset. So we have to learn to be more content with what we get from outside so that we can see that the real problem is inside.

When the Buddha talks about contentment, it's interesting: He says that there are some things that you endure and other things that you don't. The things you endure are harsh words, hurtful words, and physical pains. If you can learn how to endure those things, then you find it easier to stay in any kind of situation, whatever the food, whatever the clothing, whatever the shelter. And you're fine.

What you don't endure, he says, are unskillful thoughts when they arise in the mind. You don't want to just let them hang out there, putting down roots or filling more dirty water into your cup. You've got to throw them out; throw them out. The Buddha lists them as thoughts involved with sensuality—in other words, your fascination with planning sensual pleasures; thoughts of ill will—hoping to see other people suffer; and thoughts of harmfulness, where you don't simply wait for them to suffer on their own. You're going to see if you can hurry up the suffering. All of those kinds of thinking, he said, you shouldn't endure at all. Don't let them hang out in the mind.

So here again, the emphasis is not so much on the situation outside, it's on what you bring to the situation. You've just got to be careful about that. If you're more and more alert and aware of what you're bringing and you can see it's causing suffering, then you can drop it.

The Buddha give you alternative ways of thinking. There's that great passage where a monk is going out to a pretty rough area of India. And the Buddha asks him before he goes, "It's a pretty rough area. What are you going to do if those people yell at you?" He says, "I'll think that they're very good and civilized in that they're not hitting me." "What if they hit you?" "Well, at least they're not hitting me with a stone." "What if they hit you with a stone?" "Well, at least they're not stabbing me with a knife." "What if they stab you with a knife?" "I'll tell myself they're good and civilized. At least they're not killing me." "What if they kill you?" "At least my death wouldn't have been a suicide." The Buddha says, "Okay, you're ready to go."

So remember, there's an alternative way of thinking when you get worked up about what other people do or say. If you learn how to bring the right attitude,

you don't have to suffer from their words or actions. They can still be wrong, they can still be doing or saying horrible things, but no matter how wrong or horrible they may be, you realize you have the choice not to suffer from that. And that gives you a lot of power.

So if you find you're suffering from the situation, ask yourself, "What am I bringing to the situation that's making me suffer?" Maybe you've got lots and lots of salt water in your cup and it's almost undrinkable, and then someone else throws in a little bit of salt and it goes over the top. If you can throw out your salt water, then that little bit of salt they throw in isn't going to be all that bad.

Again, we're not assigning blame. If you're suffering, we don't say, "Well you're suffering because you're just bad." It's simply a lack of skill. The feeling that you're a bad person, or when you carry around a lot of guilt: The Buddha doesn't encourage that either—because if you're carrying thoughts of guilt, the mind will tend to rebel. It'll put up with the thoughts of guilt for a while, and then it'll start throwing its negativity out to other people. It's as if you've got muddy water in your cup and you think a good way of emptying it is to throw it on others. But then you feel guilty again. You go back and forth like this.

When you recognize that you've made a mistake, the Buddha says to recognize it was a mistake, resolve not to repeat it, and then spread lots of goodwill to yourself and to others. You spread goodwill to yourself as a way of encouraging yourself. You're doing this for your true happiness. You spread it to others to remind yourself that you don't want to harm them again. You don't want to repeat the mistake. It gives you more and more motivation not to repeat it. So a sense of guilt also counts as dirty water that you bring to situations. Just drop it and replace it with goodwill.

So try to be very attentive to what you're bringing to the situation, what kind of water you've got in your cup. Getting the mind to be still like this, with a sense of well-being, puts you in a much better position, not only to recognize that you've got some bad stuff in your cup, but also to realize how you can throw it away. You don't have to keep carrying it around.

This is a very empowering practice. It may not enable us to change the world—it doesn't give us that kind of power—but it *does* give us the power to change our habits. We don't have to keep on creating suffering for ourselves on and on and on, the way we've been doing for so long. We can bring a noble attitude to life. And that attitude puts some really good, clean water in our cup.