

At the End of the Day

September 2, 2016

When people have time for only one meditation session a day, I usually recommend that they aim for the morning—right after they get up. The mind is refreshed; the body is refreshed. You haven't started picking up the narrative threads of the day. So it's a good time to get the mind in good shape. But, of course, that's not the only time you want to get the mind in good shape. When you have time for more meditation sessions, you can meditate at any time at all. In fact, the true answer to the question, "When is the best time to meditate?" is always, "right now." But meditating at different times of the day presents different challenges.

If you're meditating at the end of the day, like we are right now, there may be a lot left over from the day. The body may be tired; the mind may be frazzled from the events of the day. So you've got to sweep things out a bit. In terms of the body, try to breathe in a way that feels *really* refreshing. Think of the breath sweeping through the body, cleaning out all the cobwebs, all the little knots of tension that may have built up during the day.

As for the mind, sweep that out, too. Whatever the narratives of the day—no matter how horrible the day was—you can make a new narrative, saying, "So even though I was abused in these ways, I was mistreated in these ways, I was able to rise above it. And I had a really good meditation. I didn't let those events scar the mind." Part of the mind will resist that—there's a certain satisfaction that comes from going over the narratives of the day, even if they've been bad narratives. It's like picking at the scab on a wound. But you have to keep reminding yourself that there is a better alternative.

Several years back I was teaching a group of people the topic of the brahmaviharas, and we came across the passages where the Buddha is talking to two women who have lost their children, in a way to help them get over their grief. Someone in the group complained that the Buddha was saying that you shouldn't let the women grieve. After all, don't they have a right to grieve? Of course, they have a right to grieve. The Buddha's telling them how to get over the

grief. He's not telling them that they have to do it. He's telling them that they *can*. They don't have to let their lives be ruined by their loss. And he's showing them ways of thinking that help.

One the good ways of thinking is to think of the whole world—all the beings in the world, as in the Buddha's second knowledge on the night of his awakening—all the beings arising and passing away. And not just arising and passing away like bubbles on a stream, but actually dying and being reborn, and then dying again. Seeing all those dramas played out against such an enormous canvas enabled him to get away from the details and to look at the larger pattern, which is that we live and we die and we're reborn in line with our karma.

Prior to that, he had attained the first knowledge, where he had seen his own lifetimes, and they all seemed pretty random—up and down. Sometimes he would do something good in one lifetime and have a horrible next lifetime; sometimes he would do something really bad in one lifetime and be okay in the next lifetime. But as he stepped back and saw the larger pattern, he was able to see that karma really is what shapes things. Sometimes it takes a *long, long* time for an action to show its fruits. Seeing the larger picture like that, he asked, "Where does karma come from?" It comes from the intentions in the mind. So he turned in and looked at the mind.

All the ups and downs in the world come from here: all the ups and downs in the mind. If you don't tune in to the mind, there's no end to the story. But by tuning in to deal with the issues in the mind, that's how the story ends. Otherwise, it just goes back and forth and back and forth.

There's a story told in the Commentary about two women—a major wife and a minor wife. The major wife didn't have any sons, but the minor wife had a son. The major wife was afraid that this would mean the end of her position as major wife. So she killed the son of the minor wife. In the lifetimes that followed, the minor wife was born as an animal of one kind, and the major wife as an animal of another kind, and the minor wife killed the son of the major wife. It went back and forth like this, from lifetime to lifetime, until you forgot who was the major wife and who was the minor wife.

It didn't end until the time of the Buddha. One woman wanted to kill the child of another woman. So the other woman went running into the monastery.

Both of them were there, right in front of the Buddha, and he said, “Look, this has been going on for so long, to the point where you can’t remember who started it. Do you want to keep it going? Or do you want it to end?” They said, “We want it to end.” He told them, “You have to develop the right qualities in the mind. That’s how things end.”

So when you think in these ways, you’re sweeping out the mind, sweeping out the body, and then you’re ready to settle down.

If any other issues keep coming up, you think of thoughts of goodwill, thoughts of forgiveness. Forgiveness doesn’t mean, as they say, “forgive and forget,” and trying to love the other person. It’s simply that you won’t pose any danger to the other person. In making that choice, you’re protecting yourself. If you’re trying to pose dangers to other people, you’re posing a danger to yourself, too. So learn to look at things in the larger canvas—and keep that canvas at hand in case you have trouble settling down.

Then you’ve got the breath. Do what you can to make the breath as interesting and as comfortable and as enjoyable as possible. Because here at the end of the day, you need energy. So ask yourself, “What kind of breathing would feel energizing right now?” Sometimes the body will respond immediately, so let it do its thing. Other times, it just doesn’t respond much—it keeps breathing the same old way. This is when you can consciously adjust the breath until you find a way of breathing that’s engaging.

You can also think of the breath energy going into parts of the body that it rarely goes to, or in directions that you ordinarily don’t think about. If the back is feeling tired from the day, think of the breath energy coming from the soles of the feet, up the legs and going up the spine. Think of a sense of strength and solidity in the back. If there’s a pain in the back and you find that focusing on the back makes it worse, then focus on the front of the body.

The important thing is that if there are pains in the body, you don’t let them get you down. Because the pains in your body when you’re meditating are *nothing* compared to the pains that can come as you get older, as you get sick, and as you approach death. Remember that you want your mind to be solid and unshaken, especially at times like that. So if it’s shaken around right now, you’ve got work to do.

In the Buddha's analysis of feelings in the steps of breath meditation, he starts out by saying that you try to develop a way to breathe that gives rise to feelings of rapture. So ask yourself, "What kind of breathing right now would allow the body to feel really full of breath energy inside?" Then you breathe in a way to give rise to pleasure, which sometimes means that if the rapture gets too intense and is no longer pleasant, try to breathe in a way that's more easeful and subtle.

Then he simply says to breathe in and out sensitive to mental fabrication, and to breathe in and out calming mental fabrication. Those two steps require a lot of teasing out. Mental fabrication is perception and feeling. You want to see how those two things together have an impact on the mind. If there's a pain in the body, it's having an impact on the mind not only because of the pain but even more importantly because of the perception.

This is where Ajaan Maha Boowa's instructions on dealing with pain fit really neatly into what the Buddha had to say. He recommends asking questions about the perceptions. How do you perceive the pain? Do you see the pain as identical with the part of the body it's in? Can you perceive it in a way so that it's something different? As he points out, the body is just the four elements: earth, water, wind, and fire—or solidity, energy, coolness, warmth. But the pain is something else—it's a mental phenomenon; it's not physical. And your awareness, which is also mental, is something different, too. The awareness knows the pain; the pain doesn't know your awareness.

So you've got three things there, and they're very different. They're all in the spot, but they're different. They're not the same thing. If you can detect the differences among them, that helps to separate your awareness from the pain and separate the body from the pain. In that way, the pain is a lot easier to deal with. Even though the pain may not go away, the bridge that connects it to the mind is not there. In other words, you've learned how to sense how a perception is causing the pain to have an influence on the mind, and then you change the perception so that it doesn't.

If you can give rise to a sense of pleasure in parts of the body, do that. In fact, when you're going to deal with the pain, you don't want to jump right in. It's good first to have a solid sense of some spot in the body that's yours—your safe spot. It may be in a part of the body you tend to ignore, because it's just okay—

nothing special. Pain is a magnet that draws your attention. But you can start thinking of the space around the pain—the parts of the body that are comfortable. Focus there; settle in there. In Ajaan Lee’s analogy, it’s like eating a mango. There may be a wormy spot in the mango, but you don’t eat the wormy spot. You cut it out and you eat the rest. Or it’s like lying down on the floor of your house. If the floorboards in one spot are deteriorating, you don’t lie down there. You lie down in a spot where the floorboards are good.

Make the sense of ease and comfort your home base here in the body. Then, when you feel secure there, you can start looking into the pain, and start asking the right questions. And the right question is not how to make the pain go away. The right question is how to understand why this pain is having an impact on the mind. The impact on the mind: That’s the suffering in the four noble truths. The physical pain itself is not the suffering in the four noble truths. The suffering in the four noble truths is the clinging. And how do we cling? We cling through perceptions. Work on your perceptions around the pain. Be curious about the pain.

Then you can transfer the same set of questions into events going on in the mind. If the mind’s been in a bad mood, learn how to be curious about the bad mood: “How does this bad mood come in? What does it do to keep itself there? What are its tentacles? What are its Velcro strips? Can I peel them off? To what extent am I buying into some pretty bad reasons for allowing the mood to stay?” And of course part of the mind will say, “I have the right to have a bad mood.” But you can have at least another part of the mind that says, “Okay, I don’t have to stay here; there’s a way out.” And in being curious about the mood, you pull yourself away from it.

So at the end of the day, as the body or the mind is feeling worn down from the day, you’ll often find that being curious about the state of being worn down gives you energy. It allows you to step back from it and realize that there are resources in the mind—and in the body—that haven’t been exhausted by the day. You can tap into them.

As the Buddha said, when you encounter pain in terms of what you’ve seen or heard or smelled or tasted or touched or thought about in the course of the day, the right response is not to run for pleasant sights, sounds, smells, tastes, and

tactile sensations. The proper response is to remind yourself, “Here I am, being overcome by these things; I want out.” That thought may be painful, but it’s the pain that gets you into the practice and allows you to get out, to separate yourself from these things to the point where you can be curious about them. You want to understand them, because it’s through understanding them that you can work your way to freedom.

So even though it’s the end of the day, lots of prospects can open up.