

A Foundation for Restraint

November 19, 2016

Try to be with your sense of the body right here. Try to see how long you can stay here. You can use both the felt sense of the breath energy in the body, and pictures in the mind, pictures of your body, to anchor yourself. If you want to focus on the breath, think of a picture of how the breath flows. Remind yourself that it can flow in a lot of ways that you might not expect. This gives you something to be interested in the present moment—to be interested in the body. Or you can focus on the different parts of the body: hair of the head, hair of the body, nails, teeth, skin—all the way down through the list, in an objective way. Ask yourself, “Where are those different parts of the body right now?”

The body is such a huge issue in our lives. The reason we have to work is because the body needs to be fed, needs to be clothed, sheltered, needs medicine. When the slightest little thing that happens in the body, all the alarm systems go off. A huge part of your brain is devoted to keeping track of how things feel in the body, especially in the digestive tract, and in other parts as well. And it’s a big concern. But you want to learn how to make it not such a big concern, so that it doesn’t take up so much of your mind. The question then is, how to use it skillfully, and when to put it down.

Putting it down means putting it aside and not focusing so much on it. If we focus on the body to get the mind to settle down, we can focus on different aspects of the body and ask ourselves, “Why are we so attached to it?”

So the body plays a double role. On the one hand, it’s our place of refuge, so that the mind isn’t running out all over the place. But at the same time, the body itself is a problem—or our attitudes toward the body are a problem.

That’s what you’ve got to learn to sort out—to remind yourself that there is a healthy use of the body and an unhealthy use of the body. The unhealthy use is what gives rise to greed, aversion, delusion—pride around the body, lust around the body. These things can create huge problems for the mind. Of course, the mind is what’s creating the problems. If we weren’t latched on here, the body

would totally be a matter of indifference. But at the same time, you need the body in order to practice; you need the body in order to do good things.

So focus on the good side of the body, the healthy attitude you can have toward the body. One of the important uses the Buddha talks about is restraint of the senses. He says that our senses are normally like animals: They go out searching for food. It's not the case that we're just sitting here, waiting for contact to come; we're out there looking for something to feed on—something to get angry about, something to get lustful about, something to get greedy about.

The mind is a real troublemaker, a real trouble seeker. And the senses are like its animals. The animals are, in the Buddha's image, tied to leashes, and you try to tie the leashes together. But if there are just the leashes on their own, then whichever animal is the strongest is going to pull the other ones in its path. In his image you've got a bird, an alligator, a monkey, a dog, a hyena, and a snake. And of those, which is the strongest? The alligator. So it's going to drag all the other animals down to the river, where they're all going to drown. In other words, your goodness dies as you go out after something to feed on based on greed, aversion, delusion, lust, resentment, whatever.

You need a post so that you can tie all the leashes to something solid. That's what the body is good for. You can start by just being aware of the breath here in the present moment, so that when the thoughts go out, you notice they're going out. This is a theme you hear from the forest ajaans a lot: There are currents that flows out of the mind. And the currents cause all the trouble. They go out your eyes, your ears, nose, tongue, body. So if you've got the sense of the breath right here, that helps you to stay here and as you watch a thought go shooting out, but you don't go shooting out with it. You can see it as something separate.

Now, that requires that the mind be really still, and inclined not to want to go running out. So this involves not only concentration but also some discernment: reminding yourself that this tendency of the mind to look for trouble is what's causing all the trouble. You have to think about the implications of that until you have a sense of dispassion toward it. The breath helps with that contemplation, giving you not just a place to stay, but a comfortable place to stay, so that you're not so hungry for whatever little hit of pleasure you might get out of an attractive sight or an appealing sound. You've got something better right here. It makes

those other things a little less attractive, a little less appealing, a little less compelling.

And you can begin to see the processes in action. In other words, instead of being so concerned about the actual object that you're looking at or listening to, you can ask yourself, "Why is the mind going for it?" In Ajaan Lee's way of putting the issue: What's doing the looking? What's doing the listening? Is it your discernment? Or is it your lust? You've got to sort these things out.

You can also look at the other end, once you've gotten engaged with a particular sight, sound, smell, tactile sensation: What effect does it have on the mind? In other words, you're looking at it as part of a causal process. It's not just the thing there with what we interpret as having its innate characteristics of being likeable or unlikeable. Instead it's part of a process. The mind goes out, picks up an object, brings it back home, clutters up the house. Okay, that's something you've got to learn how not to do.

It's one of the big ironies of people meditating: They focus entirely on just what they do when they sit with their eyes closed or they do a little walking meditation. Then they abandon it totally as they go out into the world and resume engaging with the world in their old ways. Once the mind has settled down, you want to protect it. The big destroyer of your concentration, the big destroyer of your mindfulness, is this tendency to want to go feeding off sights, sounds, smells, tastes, tactile sensations the way you had been in the past, bringing more things back to clutter up this home of the mind. So watch out for that. Try to use the breath as your anchor.

You can also use your contemplation of the body as an anchor. After you've analyzed your body into all its different parts, put them down on the floor and ask yourself: Which part there are you really attracted to? Then you can start doing the same for other people. They've got the same stuff you've got. This is a great equalizer. It also reminds you of what you're really attracted to: Are you attracted to things outside or are you attracted to your *idea* of things outside, of what you'd like to see outside? Again, this keeps bringing you back to the mind: The mind is the real problem.

There's another image for restraint of the senses. There's a big termite nest, and inside the termite nest is a civet cat. Civet cats like to go in there because they can

find things to eat inside, usually bugs of various kinds because there's more than just termites—all kinds of things go in the termite nest. The civet cat goes in there after them, and there are six holes. In this image, you block off five of the holes and you keep your attention right at one hole—in other words, right at the mind—so that you can catch the civet cat when it comes out. Because it's not sights that are causing the trouble; it's not your eye that's causing the trouble. It's not your ears or sounds, or any of the senses and their objects. It's the mind's desire to feed off of these things. This brings you right back to the mind. So you've got to protect it.

Otherwise, if you let it just go wandering off however it likes during the course of the day, then when you sit down to meditate, it's going to want to keep on wandering. In the meantime, it has brought in all this stuff to clutter up the house. There's no place to sit down. You're going to have to spend the whole time just throwing things out, throwing things out, throwing things out. You finally get it clean, and then you leave the meditation and then you drag more garbage into the house again.

So if you really are earnest about training your mind, really are earnest about trying to see if there's some way you can lessen its burdens and relieve its suffering, then meditation can't be simply a matter of what you do when you sit with your eyes closed or when you're doing formal walking meditation. It's how you engage the world through *all* your senses, all throughout the day.

We often talk about bringing the practice into your life. A much better image would be bringing your life into the practice. In other words, make the practice of wanting to train your mind the container, and all the rest of your engagement with the world has to fit within that container. If it doesn't fit within that container, you don't want it. It's just going to create unnecessary trouble, destroying the container, and then you'll have to patch it up again.

At the same time, when you learn some restraint over the senses as you go through the day, then when you do come to sit down, you're sitting down with some better habits. Because it's the same mind. You've placed some restraint over it, but it's a friendly restraint in the sense there's a sense of ease that goes with being settled in the body. Then the mind will be more likely to want to stay with the breath, realizing that the restraint involved in staying with the breath is not an unfriendly restraint.

When the Buddha talks about restraint, he describes two kinds: There's restraint of the senses and then restraint over your thoughts and words and deeds—in other words, what you do as you go out toward the world. Both kinds are motivated by another restraint: the restraint of goodwill. We don't usually think of goodwill as a restraint. Instead we think of it as a natural outpouring of our innate goodness. But that's not how the Buddha taught it. He said that it is a form of restraint. You realize that there are certain things you simply cannot do if you really want true happiness. And the path enables you to have a sense of well-being as you deny yourself your old ways of feeding. It's because you truly want true happiness, and you'd like that happiness to spread around, you don't want your happiness to have to depend on anyone else's suffering: That's what motivates all this restraint.

So it's not simply just a matter of clamping down yourself, which, if it's done in an unskillful way, just leads you to explode. Instead, you gather things in; you protect things that are valuable. And watch out for any tendencies to be the person who destroys those valuables, out of thoughtlessness or the desire for cheap thrills. You want a happiness that lasts. And it's because of that motivation that your restraint can become healthy.