

In Alignment

June 5, 2017

If you could take a movie of the different shapes that your mind goes through in the course of a day, it'd be wilder and more bizarre than the shape-shifting screen savers you see on your computer screen. It can stretch out to fill the whole universe then shrink down to a little spot; send an extension out to the east, to the west. Its shapes are more variegated than an amoeba and go through a wider range of sizes. So when you try to bring the mind to settle down with the breath, to simply be here with the body in the present moment, it's going to take a fair amount of adjusting so you can bring things into balance, bring things into alignment, because the mind finds it so easy to shift its shape again—or to get waylaid.

You've got three things you're trying to bring together. You've got the mind and the body—which you're feeling from the inside, primarily as the breath—and then a feeling of pleasure. The feeling of pleasure is what allows these things to stay together with a sense of well-being. But even that can be slippery. You learn how to breathe in a way that feels good in the different parts of the body and it's all too easy just to go for the pleasure, in which case you've lost part of the alignment that you're trying to create between body, feeling, and mind. It feels good and you can stick with it for a while. But then it begins to blur.

Or if your awareness is too small, focused at one spot in the body, and the breath begins to get more and more subtle, it loses its focus too. So as soon as the breath gets comfortable, think of spreading your awareness to fill the body. Think of the comfort filling to spread through the body, while you stay with the perception of breath filling the body. You've got all three things together right here.

Other things will come up to pull you away. It's interesting that when Ajaan Lee, in *The Craft of the Heart*, talks about the different obstacles in concentration, some of them are your hindrances, but some of them are things like rapture and visions: in other words, things you'll actually encounter as part of concentration itself, things that are signs that you're settling down. And you have to be careful not to focus on them. As I was saying today, it's like a sign on the side of a road. It says, "Now entering Valley Center." But you don't drive on the sign. You keep on the road. You notice that the sign is there, but you don't focus on it. The same holds true with other things that may come up as you're trying to bring things into alignment and as they're struggling to get away.

With the hindrances, you have to learn how to recognize them as hindrances and drop them. If a sense of light comes up, don't make that the object of your concentration until you're really well established with the breath. Then you can bring the light into the realm of the breath and spread it as well, once you have it under your control. But if it's just coming and going, and you can't really control it, don't have anything to do with it.

There are certain things that you just can't touch as you're going into meditation, no matter how attractive they may be. There was an old monk who was a friend of Ajaan Fuang's. He was a doctor the last couple of years of his life and he had some pretty weird psychic powers. One time he and another monk had made an arrangement with the devas to go into a cave that contained all kinds of valuable objects, and there the devas who were standing guardian over the cave. The two monks had gotten permission to get one particular item out of the cave. And, as the one monk told Ajaan Fuang, as they went in they noticed that there were a lot of other treasures in the cave—and a lot of skeletons. People had gone into the cave, trying to take something that they didn't have permission for, and so they died. So the two monks had to stay focused on just what they were after and then get it out. Then they were safe.

In some ways, meditating is like that. There are things that will pull you away, sometimes very attractive things—a sense of light or fascinating visions—but you can't go for them. You've got to maintain the sense of body, feeling, breath. Keep those three things together.

Remember that the breath is your anchor. It'll get more subtle as your concentration improves, which means that you have to be even more careful about staying with it, because it gets easier and easier to lose as it gets subtle. You basically stay with the breath all the way through the fourth jhana, to the point where the breath actually gets still. There's a still breath energy in the body, but the movement of the in-and-out breath stops. Only after you can stay there solidly are you ready to move onto the formless states. Up until that point, you've got to have some sense of breath as your anchor. It is possible to go into something formless in the meantime, but it won't be solid. So you've got to get everything ready, because if you're staying in the formless states, it's simply the perception that keeps you there. And until you can maintain a perception so that it's totally seamless and totally constant, you're not ready.

Now, while you're working with the breath, you've got the breath here. When it comes in, when it moves, it reminds you, "Breath. The breath is here." And so, if there's a lapse in the perception, then the breath makes up for the gap. Otherwise, you get into the pleasure or into anything else that pulls you away, and it may be pleasant for a while, but you've lost your foundation. You want a state of mind that's able to observe itself very clearly, and if you can't keep just this much in mind, you're going to start floating around. And when you start floating, it's like boats floating on a river or on a lake. It's hard to tell which boat is standing still and which boat is moving because there's no firm reference point. But the breath gives you a reference point so that you can see the movements of the mind as they happen.

And don't be afraid that the pleasure won't be able to do its work unless you wallow in it. It'll do its work. In fact, you'll be able to keep creating more and more pleasure for the body until the body has had enough of the pleasure. Then you can drop it. Prior to that, you may be dealing with rapture, which, for different people, occurs in different ways. And, again, the symptoms of rapture sometimes have to do with the issue of trying to get everything to come together in alignment, in balance. You may get a sense of the body as being really large, or

really small, or one part being large and another part being small. In other words, your sensation of the body gets distorted as the energy flow begins to re-adjust itself. You've got to hang on to the breath in those cases as well.

So the breath gives you your anchor. As the Buddha says, when you're dealing with the four frames of reference, you can do them all as you're dealing with the breath. The act of attending to the breath gives rise to a feeling of pleasure. So you've got feeling. And the fact that you're keeping the breath in mind gives you a mind-state of alertness. And then you're being equanimous about what comes up, which gives you the mental quality you're looking for. So all four frames of reference are right here.

But the breath is the anchor to help keep the other things from drifting away. In this way, you bring things into alignment. You can keep them in alignment as the mind shudders and wobbles a bit as it settles down. But as it gets more and more used to being here, you realize that this should be your default mode, not sending out pseudopods in all directions, but being centered right here with a sense of well-being and with no felt need to have to think about things. At first, you're thinking about the breath. But then you just hold the perception, i.e., the image of the breath, or just the word "breath" in mind. And that's enough to help keep the anchor, or the connection, between the body and the mind.

But when you get really still, there's a sense of having been satisfied by the rapture, satisfied by the pleasure. The mind can settle down, and things do come into equilibrium. They come into alignment. They come into balance with a sense of lightness. It's not that you're confining the breath here. It feels natural and expansive. The body feels at its ease. You just learn how to maintain that, because in maintaining that, you have that point of reference to see the things you want to see.

Just make sure things are steady and in alignment. Otherwise, what you see is going to be distorted, just like the different distortions that the mind goes through in its ordinary state. Ajaan Lee's image is of looking in a mirror. Some mirrors are convex. Some mirrors are concave. They give you very distorted reflections. You want a mirror that's smooth, flat, and bright. Then you can see things for what they are.