

Endurance

November 18, 2017

That last phrase in the last chant, “May you forever be well” We know that things outside will not always be well. But there is a skill you can develop so that inside is always well. And meditation is part of that skill. You’re going to be looking at your own mind as the mind is looking at the breath. In the beginning, you want to pay most attention to the breath, and pay attention to the mind mainly when it’s not with the breath. When it’s wandering off, bring it back.

Try to breathe in a way that will make the mind want to stay with the breath. What kind of breathing would feel good right now—really good? Down through the torso, down through the legs, down through the arms, all over the body: Which spot in the body seems to be most sensitive to the breath coming in going out? Focus your attention there. And see what kind of breathing feels really good there.

If the mind wanders off, bring it back. You’re trying to protect this sense of well-being right in that spot inside. That will be something you can learn to depend on. At first it may not be all that easy, because the mind has a tendency to want to wander around, to think about this, think about that, think about three or four things all at once, especially now that we’re more and more used to multitasking. Here we’re trying to do some monotasking. It takes a while for the mind to feel all right about being with just one thing. But again, if you can make the spot in the body that seems most sensitive to the breathing as comfortable as you can, it gives you a reason to stay. To want to protect it.

Because your ability to carry this sense of well-being with you is going to be your foundation for dealing with the pains of the world outside: pains in your body, painful words that people say to you, disheartening things you may see around you outside. You need to have your protection inside so that your strength doesn’t get sapped. Because endurance is a strength.

We tend to look down on it to some extent. People enduring hardships, enduring harsh words, enduring abusive behaviour: It’s almost like you endure it but you don’t fight back. That’s not what the Buddha is talking about. He’s talking about your strength to withstand painful words and painful feelings, and not get blown around by them. When you’re not blown around by them, you can figure out what is the best thing to do in any situation with a lot more clarity and a lot more precision.

At the same time, you suffer less. Because the trick to endurance is not so much that you sit there and just take it, take it, take it. You learn how when they’re dishing it out, you don’t take it. You learn how to step to the side. And

this applies both to painful feelings in the body and to painful words outside. The reason we find it hard to endure these things is because we pick them up and carry them around.

Ajaan Lee's image is of someone who's plowing a field and takes all the dirt as it comes off the plow and puts it into a bag. Of course, by the time you get to the end of the first furrow, you're already too weighed down to go any much further. You can notice this sometimes as you're sitting and meditating: There's a pain in some part of the body, and it seems as if with every moment of pain, you're just adding one more bit of pain to the collection. In other words, pains from the first five minutes or so seem to be still there in your mind. You're still carrying them around. And that's where you go wrong. You have to realize that the old pains are gone. They're not there right now.

The fact that you're sitting in one position makes it seem like the pain is just building and building and building, but it doesn't have to. All you're dealing with right now is the pain right now, this very moment. And you don't have to carry that around or even into the next moment. You notice it and immediately think of it going, going, going. Maybe another pain may come to take its place, but then it goes away, too.

A lot of this has to do with your perception of the pain. If you think of it as one mass just accreting as you're sitting here, then it's going to get heavier and heavier, and it's going to be harder to deal with it. But if you think "Well, it's just this sensation right now, right now, right now, and the past sensations are gone," it's more manageable.

An image that the Buddha recommends is that you think of your mind like space. As he said, no one can write anything on space because there's no surface. In the same way, think of there being no place in your mind where the pain can write.

The same principle applies to other people, too. No one can write on your mind. What usually happens is that they say things or write things to you, and you take them in and repeat them to yourself again and again and again. You put up a wall of resistance, so they write on the wall. Your resistance says "Nobody can say nasty things about me or it's not right that they say nasty things," so of course they'll say nasty things, and there's your wall: They can write all over it.

But when you realize, "Okay their karma is their karma and it becomes your karma only if you pick it up," then they can write as much as they want but they don't leave a trace, because there's nothing in your mind they can write on. If you have that perception in mind, that your mind is like space, it makes it a lot easier to go through the world.

Again, this doesn't mean that you're going to be spacey and passive. It means that you're not inflicting yourself with the slings and arrows of

outrageous fortune. Their words may be arrows. They may shoot them at you once, and if you can learn how to sidestep the arrow, that's good. Even if they hit you, you don't have to pull the arrow out and start stabbing yourself with it again and again. Just pull the arrow out, throw it away, and then look at the situation to see what actually would be the best way to respond. If you can think in these ways, you find it a lot easier to endure things you couldn't endure before because you're not having to carry them around.

This is one of the secrets of being strong. You may feel that you're weak, and any little added hardship is another weight on you, but if you learn not to carry the weights around and just put them down, then you still have your original strength, which you can use more effectively. So learn to think of your mind as something that nobody can weigh down, nobody can write on.

As your goodwill for the world, the Buddha has similar images: goodwill as being like space; goodwill as being like the Earth. It's way much bigger than anything anybody can do to it. Or like the River Ganges, which, as the Buddha notes, is a very wide river. If someone were to try to take a torch to the river, they wouldn't be able to burn it up. It's just so much water. Think of your goodwill as being inexhaustible like that.

This doesn't necessarily mean that you're going to treat everybody with tenderness but it does mean that you're not going to do anything to harm anyone. If you carry around stories about what this person did, what that person did, and how much you've been suffering since who knows when, and you're gathering all the suffering together and putting it in the bag as you go down the field, then endurance is going to be hard. Goodwill is going to be hard.

But if you don't carry these things around, they're going to be easy, because there's nothing weighing you down. You're not a beast of burden. We're not talking about the endurance of an ox that just gets put upon all the time. It's the endurance of someone who knows how not to weigh themselves down—who knows how to have a mind like space that nobody can write on.

The Buddha talks about our perceptions as an important factor in how we shape our minds. So learn to have perceptions like this: Your mind is like space. Your goodwill is like the Earth—a lot bigger than anything anyone can do to you. And because it's like space, there's nothing anybody can write on your mind.

It's in this way that you can more and more consistently be well, regardless of what's happening outside, regardless of the pains in your body—because the mind has developed the skills by which it can protect itself and keep its endurance strong.