

## *Subduing Greed & Distress*

*January 6, 2018*

Ajaan Lee has a nice image. He says we keep stashing things away, stashing things away in our memories. We did this; we did that. That person did this; this person did that. He says it's as if you're plowing a field and you stick a bag on your water buffalo's leg. You collect all the dirt in the bag as it comes off the plow. And of course you're going to get weighed down. You get to a point where you can't make any progress.

So when you're sitting here meditating, you've got to unhook the bag. Things that happened today, things that happened last week, whatever you tend to stash away in the mind: Just let it go, let it go. You want to be totally right here. This is what having a right frame of reference for right mindfulness is all about. Anything that's not relevant to your frame of reference—the breath—right now, you just let it go. Don't keep it. Let it pass.

This is called subduing greed and distress with reference to the world. You need to do this because you really, totally, want to be here. And you want to be totally in this frame of reference. We're creating a new state of becoming here. There's going to be a new world here and a new you in this world who doesn't have to be weighed down by the "you" who's gone through life so far—or the worlds that you've been through so far.

To be fully in this world, you have to put those other worlds aside. It's like those cases in Thailand where, every now and then, you get a child who remembers a previous lifetime. The parents do their very best to stop those memories because the child, if it holds onto those memories of what it was in a previous lifetime, will never fully adjust into the present life. In the same way, you've got to adjust to being right here. There's nothing but the breath; nothing but awareness.

And as for the pains that come up in the body, those, too, are things that you want to be able to put aside and let go.

This is where the Buddha's image of making your mind like space is really useful. As he says, nobody can write anything on space. On one level, that has to do with the things that other people do and other people say. If you put up a surface for them to write on, of course there's going to be a lot of scribbling all over your mind. Think of that image in the old Zen koan of the one hand. The one hand comes to clap, but you don't clap back. They can write as much as they want,

but you're not going to provide a surface for them to write on. You're not going to keep it.

But this image can also apply to the pains you may be feeling in the body right now. The pain of the last second is gone now, so remind yourself: It's gone, it's gone, it's gone. Pains may arise, but they go away, go away. Let them go. There's too much of a tendency in the mind to make a map of the body as to where your pains are right now, and you hold onto the map and send it to the next moment. You're afraid to let it go for fear that the pains will move and go places where you don't expect them. We don't realize that part of the problem is that we're trying to pin them down, and in pinning them down we give them more reality than they need to have. In thinking that we're protecting ourselves from danger, we actually cause more pain for ourselves.

So wherever there's pain, you don't have to remember it. Let the pain write on space as well. The only thing to remember is the fact that you want to stay with the breath and you want to settle down with the breath. That's what right mindfulness is all about. It's there to get you into right concentration.

You look at the frames of reference that are being offered there. There's the body, there's feeling, and there's mind. Those are the first three frames. The body, of course, is the breath. Feeling is the sense of ease that you're trying to develop through the breath. And the mind is the awareness that you're trying to keep focused in the body with one focal point, but at the same time with a sense of the whole body around that focal point.

These are the components of concentration. Focused on the breath, when there's a sense of ease and well-being, you let the breath and the ease fill the whole body. At the same time, your awareness fills the whole body. So when we talk about mindfulness and concentration, we're talking about the same things here. Right mindfulness is simply how you get the mind into right concentration.

When the Buddha describes the four jhanas in right concentration, he's talking about the stages the mind will go through. But in the description of right concentration, he doesn't tell you how to get them there to begin with. That's in the description of right mindfulness. You stay focused on the breath, say, in and of itself—ardent, alert and mindful—putting aside greed and distress with reference to the world. That's how you get to concentration. Stick with your one object, your one frame of reference.

At the same time, you're ardent, wanting to do this right. You're alert to what you're actually doing. And you keep in mind all the things you know to stay with the breath. Everything else gets left behind. Those things are part of another world

right now. You don't want to hang on to the old fragments of the world outside, or your identity outside of the meditation. You can let those go as well.

You need your safe space right here because a lot of things that happen in the world really do involve distress. When you hold onto them, you're holding onto old wounds. There may be times when it's proper to sort through the old wounds and tend to them, but right now you don't need them. And the identity of you wounded by those things: Those aspects you can put aside as well, so that you're right here, fully right here. Any reference that would come up to remind you who you are, where you are, and what's going on in the world outside—you know, like the questions they ask when people come out of an operation: What year is it? Who's the President?—you can forget those things right now. There's just awareness, a feeling of ease, and the breath in the body. That's it.

As for the fourth frame of reference, those are the qualities you need to keep in mind either to maintain something good when you've got it, or to deal with something unskillful that's coming up. For instance, you may want to keep in mind the teachings on the five hindrances to recognize when a hindrance actually comes up: Well, what is it? Say sensual desire comes up. We don't usually think, "Oh, this is a hindrance" and then deal with it right away. Our immediate, untrained reaction, of course, is, "Hey, this is fun! Let's look into this."

But here you've got to remind yourself that if you're in the world of concentration, taking on the identity of a meditator, then these things are hindrances. They're going to get in the way of the world you're set on creating and maintaining. They're going to eat it up, destroy it. Ajaan Lee compares them to weevils that destroy a plant. So when you recognize that a mental event is a hindrance, the next step is asking what you do to get rid of it. You have to get rid of the cause. So, when it came, why did it come? What sparked it? You want to be on top of these things.

This is why one of the important skills in meditating is learning to watch the mind and recognize the little signs it gives that it's going to move away. Its grasp on the breath begins to loosen up a little bit, and part of it is looking around for where it might go. And that looking around comes in little blips. It's not continuous. It waits until your attention is turned someplace else, or your alertness lapses, and then it it's off. You black out for a bit, and you find yourself someplace else.

You want to watch out for that so that you don't black out. You'll come to see: These are the stages in how the mind wanders off. You learn them by thwarting them, by just bringing the mind right back. And then you get to see not only the arising of the hindrance, but also the fact that it's got several causes, or causes in

several stages. Something was wrong, there was something lacking in the mind, and then part of the mind proposed, “Well, how about going over here?”

All too often, what’s happened is that your attention to the breath has become mechanical. You’re just going through the motions. At that point, the concentration isn’t satisfying. It doesn’t really hit home. So to counteract that tendency, you try to raise the level of your sensitivity to what would really feel good right now, right now, right now—each breath, and each breath again. Drop your memory of what the last breath was, and be with each breath right now.

Then, when there’s a sense of ease, what are the sensitive parts of your body that would really like a little bit of extra energy? Learn how to search them out and feed them, too. In this way, the concentration becomes really satisfying, and your tendency to want to wander off someplace else gets weaker and weaker. The sense of being fully with the body grows a lot stronger. You come to realize that this world of concentration really is a world in which all the parameters are there as in the description of right mindfulness: totally with the breath, ardent, alert and mindful. Greed and distress with reference to the world are further and further away.

So you want to make sure you’re not carrying a lot of excess baggage into your meditation. Or to make another comparison—and I’d better hurry up and make this comparison before there are no longer any people who would recognize it—it’s like having film in your camera. You’ve been taking pictures, pictures, pictures, and they’re all stashed away there in the film. Now you have to think of opening up the back of the camera so that all the pictures are wiped out by the light. You don’t want to carry them into the meditation. Or if your camera has an SD card, think of erasing all the pictures on the SD card. Now we can be totally right here and have a sense that this is where we really belong.

In the beginning, the mind is kind of wobbly because it’s more used to being back in those other worlds, running around and gathering all those other little bits of information. But here, you want to drop it all. It takes a while to get used to being in this new place, but it is your safe place. The mind has a strange tendency to want to stay in areas where it’s familiar even though they involve suffering. The fact that the mind is familiar with these old ways of acting tend to make it unwilling to move into something new *because* the new areas are new. They require new skills, and there’s a different sense of you.

After a while, though, as your skill develops, you begin to get used to the fact that being a meditator is a good person to be. The world of the meditation is a good place to be. You find that you can get your balance and keep it here. And ideally, this becomes your default mode where you really are at rest—where you

really are in a safe place, not identifying with things that would easily get you wounded. And you're placing your happiness in an area where no one else can even know about it.

If other people can see your happiness, sometimes they may want to take it away from you. But here it's based on your breath. Nobody else can experience your breath the way you do. It's based on your internal sense of the body, and nobody else can experience that. You can find happiness here that's totally secure, free from any danger.

Another quote from Ajaan Lee: He says that if you have a happiness that other people know about, it's not safe. Only with things other people *don't* know are you really safe. And you've got that right here. The way you experience the body from within: That's totally yours.

So make it your home. And realize that it's a much better home than all the other shacks you've been living in for who knows how long.