

Happy to Be Here

January 9, 2018

Take a couple of good long deep in-and-out breaths and notice where you feel the breathing. Notice if it's comfortable. If it feels constricted or if you're not getting enough energy, you can think of longer breathing. Think of the whole torso being involved in the breath coming in, the breath going out. And see what kind of breathing feels best: energizing if you're feeling tired, calming if you're feeling tense or wired. Then see if you can stay with the comfortable breathing.

Think of the sense of ease that comes with the breath spreading throughout the whole body. Because when we talk about the breath, it's not just the air coming in and out of the lungs. It's a sense of energy throughout the body. And that energy is very directly related to the in-and-out breath. But it's also related to the energy flowing through the nerves; the energy flowing through the blood vessels. When you get really sensitive to that energy, you can sense it anywhere in the body at all.

But for the time being, focus on the spots that are most obvious. And see if you can stay here. If you have trouble staying here, it's useful to think about how the Buddha taught meditation. He often didn't start off straight with the breath. When he taught breath meditation to his son, he started with a few other topics as well, basically to put the mind in the right mood to realize that being in the present moment with the breath is a really good place to be: thinking about the other pleasures you could be fantasizing about right now and how they're really not worth the effort.

Think about the chant just now listing the different factors of the path. One of the factors that precedes right concentration is right resolve. There's a very clear connection between the two. Right resolve is basically resolving to put away thoughts of sensuality, to put away thoughts of ill will, and to put away thoughts of harmfulness. The Buddha talks about how he got on the right path by dividing his thinking into two sorts. On the one hand were unskillful thoughts: based on sensuality, harmfulness, ill will. On the other side, there were skillful thoughts: based on renunciation; non-ill will, i.e., goodwill; and harmlessness, compassion.

In other words, he looked at his thoughts not in terms of their content but in terms of what was driving them. If the thoughts were driven by unskillful motivations, he'd try to put a stop to them. If they were driven by skillful motivations, he'd let them, as he said, roam around. But there comes a point where thinking, even in skillful ways, gets tiring for the mind. That was when he

was ready to settle down and be still. That first exercise, dividing thoughts into two sorts and resolving to keep away from the unskillful ones and to promote the skillful ones: That's right resolve. The realization that your desire for true happiness means following the skillful thoughts until they're ready to settle down: That's how right resolve leads into right concentration.

You see this in Ajaan Lee's writings as well. His book on the frames of reference: In discussing how to get the mind to settle down, he first talks about various things you can contemplate so that you can develop a sense of what's called dismay, to think about, "Gosh all the ways I've been trying to find happiness in the world, and there's not much there. Maybe there's something better." When you really feel that way, that's when you're ready to settle down.

So what are some skillful ways of thinking? Renunciation: You're not going to sit around fantasizing about sensual pleasures right now, about sights, sounds, smells, tastes, or tactile sensations. If you look carefully at the mind, you realize that you're not attached so much to the specific sensations as you are to thinking about them, planning for them. Often with the pleasures that we go for: When you actually look at the pleasure itself, there's not much there. But there's so much build-up, the advertising you do in your own mind as to how great it's going to be, and then the advertising you do afterwards, how great it was, to encourage you to keep on doing it again. That can overwhelm the mind.

In a lot of ways, the mind lies to itself. The pleasure wasn't all that much after all. Maybe there were some karmic consequences. You ended up doing some unskillful things to get it. And then with each of the sensual pleasures: It's not pleasant all the way through. It can last only for a brief time. When it's gone, there's a sorrow over the fact that it's gone. Whereas the pleasure that comes from the Dhamma is not like that. When you've done something good, you can think about it later and every time you think about it, it's still good. When you're thinking in this way, you realize that you have to really want to get involved in sensuality in order to stick with it. So why bother putting in all that effort?

The Buddha gives you lots of skillful ways for thinking about sensual pleasures: how dangerous they are; how fleeting they are—dangerous in the sense that when you get something, other people see it and they may want it too. If you're standing in the way, they'll push you out of the way. Dangerous also in the sense that devotion to sensual pleasures develops bad states in the mind: states that get more and more inflamed, and are not satisfied with your old pleasures. They always want something new.

The Buddha also recommends realizing that these things don't really belong to you. A lot of things from which we gain our pleasure are not really us or ours. The people who have control over them could take them away at any time.

So these are some of the ways you might think about sensuality to the point where you can tell yourself, "I don't really want to go there. I want to go someplace else."

Other times, though, you find that your meditation time is being hijacked by ill will. You're thinking about people who have wronged you, and all you can think about is how much you want to get back at them and how much you'd like to see them suffer. This is why we develop thoughts of goodwill. We have that chant every evening, but you should do more than just the chant. You have to stop and think about what it means to have goodwill for other beings. To begin with, it doesn't mean that you have to love them. It means simply that you wish for their happiness. With that phrase, "May they look after themselves with ease," you're not promising to be there for them, but you're hoping that they will be able to provide for their own happiness. If there's any way you can help, you're happy to help. But if they're going to be happy, what does it mean? It means they have to understand the causes for true happiness and be able to act on them, which means that if they've been acting in unskillful ways, you're hoping that they'll see the error of their ways and be willing to change. And you're going to be happy for them if they can. You're not going to think, "Well, I'd like to see them suffer a little bit first before they see the light."

Then you can ask yourself, "Is there anybody out there for whom you can't feel goodwill of this sort?"

And remember, you're doing this for yourself. First off, right now so that you can help get the mind to settle down. But secondly, when you go out in the world and you're dealing with other people, you're going to be dealing with a lot of people you don't like: people who do things that are pretty outrageous. And yet you have to have goodwill for them. Otherwise, you're going to start doing outrageous things, too, in response.

Then you start thinking about what's actually involved in looking for happiness in the world: If it's in the world, it's going to involve getting into conflict with other people. This is why we have thoughts of ill will and also thoughts of harmfulness.

And where does that kind of conflict come from? As the Buddha said, it comes from a type of thinking in which you lay claim to a certain identity and then that identity has to lay claim to a part of the world in order to sustain itself. And, of

course, your boundaries are going to overlap with other people's boundaries. There's going to be conflict.

So the Buddha's solution is not to give up in the search for happiness, but to look for happiness inside, someplace where no one else's boundaries extend: i.e., your sense of the body as you feel it from within and the mental events you experience right here, right now. Nobody else can experience these things. When they look at you, they can't even see them.

This is your territory. Why don't you take advantage of it? In Ajaan Lee's terms, you've been running around trying to plant your crops in other people's property. Why don't you look at the fact that you've got your own property here that's covered with weeds? If you clear away the weeds, plow the soil, plant the plants, then your property will provide you with all the food you need.

So if the mind is having trouble settling down, stop and think in these ways. Think in terms of renunciation. Think in terms of goodwill. Think in terms of compassion. Compassion is related to goodwill in the sense that there are times when you actually see someone suffering, and instead of deciding to take advantage of the situation because they're in a position of weakness, you say, No. May they be released from their suffering.

So if you find that your thinking is running off, learn how to direct your thinking in another way. One of the factors of jhana, or right concentration, is directed thought and evaluation, (*vitakka* and *vicara*), as we chanted just now. You're thinking about the breath. And you talk to yourself about the breath. Instead of talking to yourself about sensuality or talking to yourself about ill will, you talk to yourself about: "How is the breath doing right now?" Talk to yourself about this territory of yours inside that you need to develop, where you need to clear the land and get everything ready. How's it going? Eventually, the mind will be able to drop even that discussion. But, it'll take a while.

So meditation isn't just an exercise in stopping your thinking. It means first learning how to bring your thinking under control and putting it to good use. So even if the mind is ready to settle down and devote its attention to developing the potentials of happiness that are here inside, then to whatever extent the weeds have grown up and things need to be fixed. That's what your directed thought and evaluation are for. In other words, they're for getting the mind together with the breath, adjusting the breath if that needs to be done, adjusting the mind if that needs to be done, adjusting the point of focus, the amount of pressure you put on things. If you put too much pressure on the breath, that's not going to be natural. When there's not enough pressure, the mind begins to float away. So you've

got to figure out how much pressure is just right. This, too, is something you need to think about.

But instead of thinking in the abstract, you're thinking about what you're doing right here and now. If things are going well, you ask yourself, "How can I maintain this?" If they're not going well, you ask yourself, "What can I change?" All of this comes under right resolve. It's how you move into the territory. You move your focus in so that the fit between the mind and the breath becomes a nice snug fit. It feels really good to be here. This feels like the right place to be. And any random thoughts that might come up and pull you away, you've already dealt with the main topics: i.e., sensuality, ill will, harmfulness. So why go back to them? There's plenty to explore here, plenty to learn about. The land needs to be cleared.

The Buddha talks about a sense of ease and well-being that come from the fact that you've secluded your thoughts from sensuality and you're just here with the breath. What do you do with that? First, you try to maintain that sense of ease. Second, you think about it spreading through the body. The Buddha's image is of a person mixing basically a dough, making a dough out of flour and water so that every part of that heap of flour is moistened with the water. There are no dry patches. In the same way, you try to let that sense of ease flow through the body. Ajaan Lee talks about letting the breath energy flow throughout the body. When you breathe in, notice: Where does the breath flow? Where does it not flow? Does it feel constricted? Can you think of it loosening up? When you loosen it up, the sense of ease can flow. And this is how thinking in the right way—i.e., using right resolve—helps you to settle down.

So when the Buddha set out the noble eightfold path, there were no unnecessary factors. They're all part of the path. They're all necessary. And they're all very intimately connected. When you realize that fact, then you can start using the other factors to help the mind to settle down. The Buddha talks about right concentration as being the heart of the path and the other factors as being its requisites, the things that help it along. So if your concentration is having problems, look at the other factors. Start with right view and right resolve, and then move around to the other ones, because they're all related to this process of learning how to find satisfaction just being here breathing.

There was that great comment by Stephen Colbert one time about Buddhism. "What is this? You wrap yourself up in a cloth and sit under a tree and breathe?" And the answer is, "Yes, if you know how to do it right." And right resolve points out a lot of effective ways how to do so you do find a sense that this is where you really do belong. And this is where you're happy to be.