

Choosing Your Allies

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We have this body. We have this mind. We identify ourselves with them. But they don't always do what we want them to do. Sometimes they turn on us. This is why we have to train them, so that at the very least there'll be something in the body and something in the mind that we can depend on. Your desire for true happiness: The Buddha says you can depend on that. As for the body, eventually it's going to have to leave you. But there are parts of the body you can train so that there can be allies as you try to find true happiness.

One of the reasons why we focus on the breath is because, of the various elements or properties of the body, it's the one that we can manipulate most easily. You can breathe long, short; deep, shallow; heavy, light; or long in, short out; short in, long out in a way that gives rise to a sense of ease. So whichever type of breathing feels good right now, experiment to find out what it is. And keep tabs on that because you want the breath to be your ally.

Now in training it, you have to listen to it in addition to telling it what to do. If you don't listen to it, there will be times when you tell it what to do and it'll respond in ways that can actually aggravate physical problems or mental problems. So think of this as a friendship where it takes a while to get to know the other person. And how do you get to know the other person? You spend time with the other person. You're observant. You listen. You ask this and ask that; notice this; notice that. And over time you get a better and better sense of how much you can rely on this other person. And if you're reliable, the other person's is more likely to be reliable as well.

So, as Ajaan Lee says, spend a lot of time with your friend here. You're trying to become friends with the breath. Spend time so that you can you notice: When you breathe in, exactly how does it feel? When you breathe out, exactly how does it feel? We have some cartoon ideas in our head about what happens as the air comes in and out of the lungs through the nose, through the mouth. But when you actually sit down and sense the breath from inside—in other words, feel your body from inside—what does it feel like? Remember that, in the Buddha's analysis, the breath element is actually the energy that allows the air to come in and go out. Where does that start? How does it spread through the body? What are the energy channels? What are the energy centers? When the in-breath starts coming in, where does it feel like it starts? Around the navel? The middle of the chest? Ask yourself. Look. And when the energy starts to spread, is there anything

to get in the way? If there is, relax around it so that the energy is allowed to flow smoothly through the body. And as you're gentle and inquisitive with the breath like this, it'll start showing its potentials: different ways of breathing that can have a different effect on the mind, calming when you need to be calmed, energized when you need to be energized.

This way, you can develop an ally here in the body—an ally you need, because you've got that other problem: the mind. As I often say, the mind is like a committee. Sometimes it's like the Chicago City Council: All kinds of deals are being made behind the scenes and they can get disruptive. Sometimes it's like the national assembly they called in France at the end of the Old Regime. They were called in for one purpose and they ended up overthrowing the king. There are parts of the mind that want to overthrow your desire for true happiness: worries that want to take over; anxiety that wants to take over; anger that wants to take over; fear; lust. And they're not your friends. Sometimes they come along looking very friendly but then they can turn on you.

And one of their ways of overcoming you is by getting hold of your breath and breathing in a way that makes it not only mentally painful to have a particular attitude in your mind, but also physically painful, to the point where you feel you've got to do something, anything, to get it out of your system. And once you're willing to do anything, they've overthrown your sense of right and wrong.

So for the sake of your genuine happiness, you want to seize the breath back, re-appropriate the breath, make it yours—so that when strange things are going on in the head, you can breathe calmly, breathe in a way that gives you a sense of grounding. And then, as the storms blow through the head, you don't have to get blown along with them.

It's like the old days, when I was at the monastery in Thailand. These huge storms would come in off the ocean, and all you could do was go back to your hut and just hunker down for the night, telling yourself, "Well, we'll see what kind of damage the storm's going to do tonight. But I'm going to stay in a place that's relatively safe." And then when the storm had blown over, you could go out and assess the damage. As long as you weren't out in the storm, you were okay. And the damage always turned out to be manageable, even when it was pretty bad.

We had a storm that came through here one time. Three, four hundred trees were blown down. One tree was blown against my hut. It kept scratching, scratching, scratching my window. I kept wondering when it was going to break through the window. Fortunately, it didn't. I came out and, seeing the trees blown down, it was as if old friends had all been knocked over and killed in battle. But we survived.

And so we live in this world. We know damaging things can happen. We simply have to accept that fact and learn how not to get damaged by them ourselves—or, more precisely, how not to damage ourselves around these things. They're a simple fact of life. As the Buddha said, in terms of human speech, there are people who will say kind things and unkind things; true things and untrue things; things that are well-meaning, things that are not well-meaning. You have to simply take that as part of human life. That's what human speech is like, and the human condition as a whole is like that as well.

Aging, illness, and death will come. There's no place anywhere in the world where you can hide and where death can't reach you. So what are you going to do? You have to develop something in the mind that's not going to be affected by that. That's where you're safe, realizing that things in life may get damaged but you can always come back if you've got the strength inside, if you've got the resources inside that you've developed, that you've trained.

So getting to know the body in this way gives you one important ally. And then you can gain other allies inside as well, remembering that desire for true happiness is not a selfish thing, and that you can develop good, noble qualities around it.

Take wisdom, for example. The Buddha said that wisdom starts with a question, "What when I do it will lead to my long term welfare and happiness?" Now, the wisdom here is based on conviction that your actions do make a difference and that long-term is possible, coupled with the realization that long-term is better than short-term. So this question focuses on the fact that your actions are really important in shaping your life and that you have the freedom to choose your actions, so you want to make the most of that freedom of choice. Wisdom is not simply accepting, "Well, things come and go and I guess I've got to be okay with that." The Buddha's saying you have the potentials within you to find true happiness, and they lie in your intentions. So look at your intentions. Train them. Choose them well. Try to act in ways that are not overcome by greed, aversion, or delusion, and you find that you really will benefit. You've got that power within you.

So here's a wisdom that comes from the desire for true happiness. The Buddha's question is what gives the right direction to that desire.

Compassion comes from the desire for true happiness, too. You realize that if you want your happiness to be long-term, you have to think about the happiness of others, because if your happiness harms them, they're not going to stand for it.

Purity in terms of your thoughts, words, and deeds: That comes from your desire for true happiness as well, because you have to look to see, when you're

doing something, does it actually harm yourself? Does it harm others? We can't just go on good intentions. We have to try to train them to be skillful intentions.

Before you do something, ask yourself, "What are the results going to be?" If you expect any harm, you don't do it. If you don't expect any harm, go ahead and give it a try. While you're doing it, look for results that are coming up in the immediate present, because not everything is going to wait until the next lifetime to give its results. When you spit in the wind, it comes right back immediately. You put your hand in the fire and it's not going to be three lifetimes down the line before you feel the pain. So sometimes you can see the results of your actions coming up immediately. If they're harmful, you stop. If you don't see anything harmful, keep on going. When the act is done, then you look at the long-term results. If you realize that it caused harm, you talk it over with somebody else who's more experienced on the path. If it didn't cause harm, take pride in the fact that you're progressing on the path.

It's in this way your good intentions become skillful intentions. And the wisdom of your desire to find something that's truly happy through your actions becomes a reality.

So you've got to learn which parts of the mind can you trust and which ones you can't. The same with the body: Which parts of the body can you work with and which ones can you not work with? It's the nature of both body and mind that they're not totally dependable. But there are parts that you can depend on, that you can turn into a path at least long enough to get to something that is really dependable, something that doesn't change. Because that's possible too. As the Buddha said, there is a deathless dimension that the mind can touch. And where do we touch it? Right here where you're aware of the body and the breath in the present moment. When that dimension opens up, this is right where it opens up. So you're in the right place right now. Simply learn how to figure out which members of the mind's committee can you trust and which properties of the body can you work with. And learn to identify with those for the time being.

As for other parts of the body, other parts of the mind, that's where the teaching on not-self comes in right away. We usually think about the idea of not-self as being fairly advanced along the path, but there are also areas where it plays a role right at the very beginning. There are parts of your body that are not going to go the way you want them to be. Remind yourself, "They're not really mine. I borrowed this body. It's like borrowed goods." You take care of it, because you're going to have to give it back some day.

Then the question then is, "What can I get out of it in the meantime?" It's like borrowing money from somebody to start a business. Some people borrow money

and then they go out and gamble with it and lose it all. Then they have nothing, or worse than nothing. They're now in debt. They're worse off than they were before. Other people, though, are wise. They figure out a good way to invest the money they've borrowed. They get a profit from it. They can give the original money back and they've still got something to carry with them that really is theirs. It's the same with the body; the same with the mind. We're going to have to lose these things someday, but if we use them properly in the meantime, we benefit. There are good qualities that get built into the mind and stay there. They can carry us through. Even as the body ages, as it grows ill, even as it dies, you've got something to carry with you.

So even though the Buddha talks a lot about suffering, it's not because he's focusing on nothing but suffering. He wants you to realize that there is suffering in the world and you have to admit that. If you try to deny it, then the mind is lying to itself. And part of it knows that it's lying to itself, which is why it gets very uneasy. But the Buddha also wants you to realize the possibility of the end of suffering, an ultimate happiness. We have to accept that it's possible to find a happiness that's clear-eyed, so that even in spite of the fact that there's aging and illness and death and separation in the world, there's something we can do through our actions that goes beyond those things. We start out by trying to find allies in the body and allies in the mind, starting with the breath in the body and with your desire for true happiness in the mind. These things, if you stick with them and befriend them, can bring you a lot of safety and genuine well-being. So get on familiar terms with them. That way, you can see for yourself how far their potentials go.