

Switch the Context

August 3, 2018

When we come to meditation, we don't usually come empty-handed. We're actually carrying a lot of burdens with us. It's all too easy when you sit down and close your eyes that a lot of the stories from the past will come flooding into your mind. They've been kept at bay as you go through the activities of your normal day, and now here's an empty space, so they come flooding in. You need to find a few effective ways of getting them out of the way so that you can settle down.

One is to keep reminding yourself that whatever stories you may have about how you were wronged by this person or you picked up bad habits from your family, issues at work, whatever: Think of it all as karma. And think of karma going back quite a ways in the sense that, okay, what you have now may be the result of your past karma, but then that past karma may have been picked up from somebody else, and then they picked it up from you, and you picked it from them.

If you trace this back long enough, you begin to realize that it doesn't really matter whose karma it is or who started the back-and-forth. It's just karma. When you can depersonalize it that way, it makes it a lot easier to put the stories down. Now, it's not so much that you're to blame and someone else is innocent. It's more that everybody has been throwing stuff around for a long time, and it doesn't really matter who started it. What matters now is: Do you want to keep it up? Do you want to keep it going?

This is one of the reasons why Buddhism isn't all that big on justice having to be done, because the question is: Where does the story start? To have a just resolution of something, you have to know who started it, who threw the first stone, or who overreacted to the first stone. But here it's impossible to tell, so instead, the Buddha counsels wisdom: Get out. Get out of the back-and-forth, and here's your opening.

You can pull out of all those narratives in your head and just be here with your body. And just as it's good to depersonalize the narratives, try to depersonalize your body. It's just breath. Just sensations felt through the breath. And you're just settling in. It's just you—you and your breath. Nobody else has to get involved. You don't have to compare yourself to how well other people may be able to play with the breath or do things with the breath. You're just dealing with *your* breath. Nobody else is going to get involved. Nobody else has any role to play. It's just an issue between you and your breath.

The question is: How can you settle down? What's the best way to get the breath so that it feels good enough to settle down? It doesn't have to be perfect. We're not running a breath competition here. There'd be no way to judge the results or judge the contestants, anyway. We're here to get the breath so that it's okay enough for you to want to settle down, to feel okay in the present moment, so that you're willing to stay here.

In some cases, this means working through patterns of tensions that have been there for a long, long time in the body.

Years back when I was first meditating with Ajaan Fuang, I began to notice that there was a bit of tension in one of my feet, and that if I tried to focus too intently on it, it just stayed tense, so I worked around the edges. Then one day it released, and as it released, I suddenly remembered an incident from my childhood that I'd forgotten. I was up in the second story of our barn, I jumped down into a pile of hay below, and there was a nail in the pile of hay. It went right through my foot. So even though the wound had healed a long time ago, there was still that knot of tension there that I'd been carrying around ever since then. And that was just a physical problem. Sometimes there are psychological problems that are knotted up inside, and it's going to take a long time, working both from the side of the breath and from the side of your attitudes, to untie that knot.

So be patient with the knots. Be patient with the hard spots in the body that just don't seem to respond to the breath. Focus on the spots you *can* make comfortable. They're going to be your home. And gently work around everything else. You're trying to gather your forces here. Which sections of the body feel good? Can you think of connecting them? Think of the breath as your initial or primary experience of the body. Everything else you experience about the body has to come through the breath. All the other elements, pains, and pleasures: They have to come through the breath. Think of it in that way. That puts the breath up in the forefront, and it also gives you the sense of it's being here first.

All too often, we have the idea that there's the solid part of the body already there and then you have to push the breath through it. In other words, the solid part was there first; the breath is a sojourner. But think of it the other way around. The breath is first. The sense of solidity comes after.

Your ability to switch contexts like this is going to be important, not only as you get settled down with the breath in the body, but also as you deal with other issues in the mind. Instead of thinking, "It's me having these issues with these people," just think, "It's karma." Your sense of "you" is a kind of karma. Your sense of yourself being wronged is a kind of karma. That thought helps to act as a solvent to dissolve a lot of the narratives.

Your sense of the world in which you exist: That's also an act of becoming. We were talking the other day about how dependent co-arising doesn't happen inside you or inside the world. You and the world happen inside the pattern of dependent co-arising, which gives you a greater sense of the fluidity of all this: that your habits are not etched in stone. You're not etched in stone. The world around you is not etched in stone. These things are processes, and you have to learn how to bring more knowledge to these processes. That perspective can dissolve away a lot of the problems that we tend to build up around ourselves and our worlds, our bodies.

So learn to switch the context around. Turn your narratives inside out. Turn your sense of the body inside out. It's not the solid body that the breath has to push into. The breath is there first. It's got every right to be there first. The other sensations of solidity and warmth and coolness: They come after. When you turn things inside out like this, you get a new perspective, and it loosens up a lot of your old attachments.

As you learn to depersonalize things and give them a new context in this way, a lot of the old stories dissolve away. A lot of your problems with settling the mind down dissolve away, and you begin to see attachments you didn't see before, how they were getting in your way, but now you're on the other side of them.