

What Are You Doing in the Present?

October 27, 2018

Try to bring your mind in harmony with the body, in harmony with the breath. Gently settle it down so that the breath can come in and go out with a sense of ease. You don't squeeze it too much. You don't force it too much. Notice, when you're breathing out too long, if there's a sense of squeezing it out, as if you're squeezing the last little bit of toothpaste out of a tube. Or when you're stuffing it in, as you breathe in too long. As for breathing too short, there's a sense that the body is not getting nourished. So give the body some freedom. You simply have to watch it. Stick with it.

Years back when I was first starting with Ajaan Fuang, he'd use an idiom in Thai, saying to "catch" the breath. I found myself subconsciously tightening up around the breath in order to catch it—not realizing what I was doing, until one day I noticed it. I found that if I didn't tighten up around the breath, it was a lot easier. So I went back to him, and being a typical Westerner, I took him to task for this: "Why do you say, 'Catch' the breath?" He laughed. He said it doesn't mean you're trying to grab hold of it, simply that you stick with it. Try to put as little pressure on it as possible, so that it can have its freedom, yet enough pressure so that you don't lose it.

There's an image in the Canon of trying to hold a little baby quail in your hand. If you hold it too tightly, it's going to die. If you hold it too loosely, it's going to fly away. Try to find just the right amount of pressure so that the breath can have its freedom, but the mind can stay with it. Then notice how it will change as things begin to settle down. This way, when the mind and body are in harmony like this, both sides benefit. The mind has a good place to stay. The body has someone looking after it.

One of Ajaan Lee's images is of a parent looking after a child. The parent has to make sure the child doesn't get sick, doesn't do anything wrong. And as long as the child is with the parent, the parent is at ease. When the child wanders away, or if the parent is away from the child, there's always a sense of worrying: What's going on? When the two are together, they're happy. It's the same way when the mind and the body are together. They're happy. The body provides a good place for the mind to rest and to gain its strength, so that you can put it to use.

I've been reading a lot of pieces recently where people say that the whole purpose of the practice is to be in the present moment. In fact, there was one this morning, a quote attributed to the Buddha, saying if that you aren't where you are right now, try to stay where you are, be where you are. Otherwise, you miss your

life. I can't imagine the Buddha talking about missing your life. But he does talk about missing opportunities. The present here is not just to be in, it's to work in. We're already working in the present moment. The question is: Are we doing good work? The purpose of meditation is to give us better work to do.

There's a passage where the Buddha's talking about the five aggregates, and how fabrication fabricates all the other aggregates, including itself, for the purpose of something: maybe for the purpose of entertainment, for the purpose of whatever: gaining a livelihood, finding pleasure. There's always a purpose in the way we shape the present moment. The problem is that our purposes are often hidden to us. And all too often they work at cross purposes. When we make up our minds we're going to take on the practice, we're trying to point all our purposes in one direction: to find the end of suffering, to find an end to the way we cause ourselves unnecessary suffering.

That's the work we do. As we chanted in the Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta just now, we have our duties in the present moment. There's a duty to comprehend suffering, the duty to abandon its cause, to realize its cessation, and we do that by developing the path. We focus on the breath not for the sake of the breath, but for the purpose of figuring out our own mind. The best place to observe the mind is in the present moment, and the breath is in the present moment. There's no future breath that you can examine, no past breath, just the breath in the present. So as long as you're with the breath in the present, you're focused on the right spot.

That's where you can begin to see the movements of the mind in the present: where they go and what purposes they have. We find this most easily by giving ourselves the purpose of just staying here with a breath, so that the other purposes will have something to run up against. Otherwise, it's all very liquid, very fluid. One purpose blends into another, blends into another, and before you know it, you're off, someplace in the middle the Indian Ocean. The currents can pull you, but actually you're the one making the shift from one current to the next. But if you have one firm purpose, that you're going to stay here with the breath, the different currents in the mind will reveal themselves.

This is why the Buddha said, when he was teaching meditation, to go do jhanna, go do concentration. He didn't make a distinction between doing tranquility and doing insight. He just said to do jhāna. You're trying to make something out of the mind, you're giving the mind a purpose, a solid one-directional purpose here: to get centered. In so doing, you have to deal with all the other purposes that might surface, that might complain, that might want to get in the way to take you someplace else. That's where the insight comes in. In some

cases, something else comes up, and you can see it right away, you see right *through* it right away. You just stay with the mind; you just stay with a breath.

There are the things like the crickets in the background: They're there but they don't disturb you. Other things, however, come in and take over. You've shifted from the world of the meditation into another world. As soon as you realize that's happened, you try to get back. Then you try to prepare yourself for the next time, so that when the mind does shift, you see how it does it.

This is where a lot of the insight comes in: in seeing the steps. A little stirring of energy in the body and the mind, and then you slap a perception on it, put a label on it: This is a thought about x , it's a thought about the future, a thought about the past, this person, that person. You should ask yourself, where did you get this line up of perceptions you slap on things? Where did that come from? Can you catch the mind as it's deciding which perception it wants to go with? Sometimes there's a choice; sometimes there's simply an association.

Certain thoughts have their little homes in different parts of the body. There will be a little bit of tension in that one spot, which acts as your anchor as you're thinking about that thought, and then when tension comes up again in that spot, you associate that spot with that thought and you just go with it. That's one way.

Other times, though, the mind has certain agendas, concerning things it wants to think about—or part of the mind wants to think about—and it'll take anything as an excuse to pull a particular thought in its direction. These are things you want to watch out for as you try to get the mind still. Sometimes it gets very still, it seems to have nothing going on for long periods of time, and you wonder, "What should I do next?" Well, watch out. The little voice that says, "What should I do next?" may be the thing that you should be looking into.

We're always doing concentration as we meditate. The question is to what extent is tranquility going to be emphasized and to what extent is insight going to be emphasized. But they're both there in the context of the concentration and they're both related to questions. The tranquility is related to the questions: "How can I get the mind to settle down? How can I get it to have a sense of ease in the present moment? Feel at home here?" Insight asks the questions of, "How am I shaping my experience here? What is just a random fabrication? How do I view these fabrications so that I can develop some dispassion for them?"

In the beginning, you apply those questions to everything but the concentration, because you don't want to be dispassionate about concentration while it's still only half formed or half mastered. This has to be your passion. This is the direction, this is the purpose, that you give to your meditation. The insights will come along as you're trying to deal with other things that come in the way.

It's only when concentration is really mastered that you turn the questions of insight on it, in line with that image the Buddha gave of taking a raft across the river. As long as you're crossing the river, you need to hold on to the raft. It's only when you've got to the other side that you let go. If you don't let go at the other side, and you try to carry it around, it becomes a burden. If you let go in the middle of the river, you fall off the raft and get swept away.

So you don't try to develop dispassion for concentration until you sense there's going to be something better. As long as you're dealing with other things that are not better than the concentration, the concentration has to be your passion. That's what you're doing in the present moment: developing that concentration so that you get deeper and deeper insights into the role the mind plays in shaping its experience. That's why we go to the present moment: not because it's our goal or because it's a wonderful place to stay, but because it's a place where the work gets done.

When the work is done, then it opens from the present moment into something that's even outside of time. So this is the portal, but you can't get through the portal until you've straightened everything out in the present. So we're here partly because it is a restful place to stay, and it's good to learn how to rest here, but the resting is not for the purpose of resting. It's for the purpose of gaining strength so that we can do the work that needs to be done. And who says we need to do it? The fact that we're suffering is what impels us. When the Buddha lays out these duties, he's not putting himself in a position of someone who tells us what we have to do simply because he says so.

But the nature of the problem of suffering is such that, if you want to solve the problem, this is what you've got to do. It's simply up to you to decide whether you've had enough suffering in life, and are ready to take these duties on.