

## *A World Apart*

*March 16, 2020*

We live in so many worlds. There's the world of work, the world of our family, the world of our imaginations. When we meditate, we're creating a world apart, one that's not involved in the other worlds.

We start out by focusing on the breath. As the Buddha said, you focus on the body in and of itself. In the case of the breath, this means simply being with the sensation of the breathing as it comes in and as it goes out. As for how that connects with the world outside, you try to cut all those connections.

When the Buddha describes mindfulness, it's basically two activities. One is keeping one thing in mind. In this case, it's keeping the breath in mind. The other is putting aside greed and distress with reference to the world—in other words, all your emotions about the world outside, or any other worlds that are not related to the breath in and of itself.

It may seem like you're turning your back on that world, but you're actually being very responsible, because the shape of your mind is going to determine how you interact with the world. If you want to interact in a way that's good, you've got to look after your mind. So we're looking after the mind both for its own sake and for the sake of the duties we have in the world outside. It's obvious that when the mind is calmer and clearer, then when you engage in the world outside, you can engage in a way that's more skillful.

But it's important that we keep our priorities straight. The first priority is the world of the mind in and of itself, because this is something that only you can be responsible for, and this is what you've got as your companion all the way through life, even to the end of life. Any thoughts or interests you may have in the world outside will actually get in the way of doing what needs to be done at that point, which is to stay focused on being calm in the midst of all the turmoil that will go on in the body. You want to make sure that wherever the mind goes after life, the mind will be in good shape. And being in good shape will determine that it goes to a good place.

Even before death, we deal with aging and illness. Those are times when you're dealing primarily with issues that only you can experience from inside. And the skill with which you handle them is your responsibility. No one else can help you. Others can give you advice. They can try to comfort you. But the actual skill with which you deal with these things—the extent to which you suffer or don't suffer

—depends totally on you. And this is an issue that should take high priority in your life.

This means that meditation is not simply something you stick into a few free moments. It's a matter of life and death: the life of the goodness of the mind, the death of the goodness of the mind, and your ability to handle difficult situations. When unexpected things come up, all the plans you've established for how this is going to happen and that's going to happen will often just get swept away. What you need most at times like that are powers of alertness, mindfulness, discernment, and concentration. These are precisely the skills you're developing as you stay with the breath and work with the breath so that it becomes a good place to stay.

So how does the breath feel right now? Does it feel like something you can stay with comfortably, or are you ill at ease and slipping off? Keep reminding yourself of how important it is to be with the breath so that you can put more energy into figuring out the problem of how to keep the mind with the breath. Breath is the force of life. It's the last thing that's going to leave you at death. So you want to get to know it well and establish a good relationship.

As Ajaan Lee said, you want to get so that whenever you focus on the breath, you can get the breath comfortable, so that you can feel at ease with long breathing or short breathing—or deep, or light, heavy, fast, or slow. In the beginning, you choose the kind of breathing you like. Experiment for a bit to see what feels best. If you find something that feels good, stick with it until it doesn't feel so good any more. Then you can change.

And notice where you feel the process of breathing in the body. The energy of the breath in the body exists on many levels. There's the in-and-out breath. There's the energy that flows through the nerves and the blood vessels, which is distilled from the in-and-out breath. Then there's a still breath that you can contact at certain parts of the body. Ajaan Lee talked about contacting it right at the spot where the diaphragm meets the sternum, but you may find another spot that's easier for you to contact it.

It's good to get to know all these levels of the breathing so that you can get more and more absorbed simply in the process of being with the breath. You can create this separate world and emphasize this separate world simply being here in the present moment with the sensation of the breathing. The more interesting you can make the breath, or the more interest you can take in the breath, then the easier it will be to put aside all your other issues around the world outside. It's here that the mind can gain strength, and it's here where it can understand itself.

We were talking today about how rare it is for people to really know what their intentions are when they act, and how sad it is, because their intentions are going to shape their lives both now and into the future. If you don't know your intentions, it's like giving the keys of your car to just anybody who comes by. They may take your car and steal it, run off with it, run into somebody, and you get into trouble because it's your car.

So the more consistently you can stay with the breath, the clearer the mind is going to be and the clearer its intentions will be. There are people who ask, "We meditate partly to get ready for dying. Yet the body's going to leave us at death, so why focus on the breath?" Well, the answer is that when you focus on the breath, you're not with just the breath. You also get to see the mind more and more clearly. By giving it something nearby to focus on like this, it's easier to see it clearly in action. If you just try to focus on awareness itself right from the very beginning, it gets too vague. But when the mind has a task to do, something to focus on right here, then it's a lot easier to see its other movements.

Being with the breath gives you a point of reference. It's like lying on your back out in a field. You look up in the sky and see the clouds. If you can't see anything fixed in one position, then you're not really sure which clouds are moving and which clouds are not, or what direction they're moving in. But if you can see something like a telephone pole or a tree that's not moving, you focus on the tree or on the telephone pole, and you understand the movements of the clouds because you've got a point of reference.

In the same way, when you focus on the breath, you can understand the movements of the mind. And when the movements of your own mind are clear, then you're a lot more in control. So you create this space to give the mind strength, to give it understanding, partly because you can then take that mind that you've trained and use it in your day-to-day activities—in your studies, in your work.

But that's not the only reason. We all have the issue inside that we're creating unnecessary suffering for ourselves. And life will provide us with lots of opportunities to create even more suffering if we're not careful. But if we can learn the proper skills, then we can take this area inside for which we're responsible and for which no one else can be responsible, and we can straighten it out. We'll benefit. The people around us will benefit. So it's important that we give high priority to this world inside because, as I said, nobody else can know how you experience it. Nobody else can know the suffering you're creating for yourself here. No one else can solve the problem.

Even the Buddha with all of his compassion can't come in and solve the problems for us. But he does give us advice. That's one of the amazing things about his awakening. After he awakened, he didn't have to teach at all. Or he could have talked about how wonderful his awakening was, for the rest of his life. But instead, he decided to use the insights he gained from his awakening to be helpful to other people, in particular in this area where they need to help themselves and where, so often, we don't get good advice. So here's advice from someone who learned how not to suffer no matter what the situation. It's offered freely, and it's up to us to appreciate how important it is, how useful it is. And the best way to do that is to give it a try.

Ajaan Lee gives the analogy of a recipe for a medicine. If a recipe is handed down and nobody makes the medicine or takes it, after a while people just see it as writing on a piece of paper. They get careless about it. But if they've used the recipe, they've made the medicine, they've taken the medicine, and it's cured their illness, then they're going to appreciate that the recipe's really good. They'll do their best to maintain it. They'll keep it in a safe place and hand it down to other people. In that way, everyone can benefit, and the recipe doesn't disappear from the world.

Everything in the recipe points right here, so point your attention right here. When this world inside gets straightened out, then worlds outside are not going to be a problem for the mind at all—because the happiness that comes from curing the problem within in is so solid that nothing else can efface it.

So give this happiness some priority in your life. Remember that the meditation is not something you simply squeeze into a few spare moments. It's *the* most important skill you can master. So give it the attention, the time, and the care it deserves.