

In the Land of Wrong View

April 24, 2020

Focus your attention on the breath. Notice, when you breathe in, where do you feel it? You may not be feeling it primarily in the areas where you think you should. But that doesn't matter. In fact, when you notice that the breath is doing things you don't expect, that's when you know that you're really watching it. Because the way we breathe will vary from time to time. And even though we know air is coming through the nose into the lungs, still the sensation of breathing in, breathing out, is not related only to the nose or the lungs.

As the energy flows through the body, it's going to be doing different things. The more you can be aware of that, the more you'll be able to escape the framework of the mind, the mind's preconceived notions, and approach the breath in the proper way, which is that you're exploring it. Meditation is exploration. You're going to be learning new things. Even if you've been meditating many, many times and you know the instructions very well, still it's always possible that something new will come up.

Instructions are there to suggest possibilities as to what you might see, where you might look. But it's up to you to do the looking and the seeing, to really notice what you've seen. So when the breath does something unusual, you're there. Then you can turn that same exploring attitude on the mind. You want to see the mind doing unusual things. The mind is like a face. It has its micro-expressions, its micro-thoughts. The more sensitive you are to the body in the present moment, the more you're going to see the little micro-thoughts, the micro-voices that come flitting through the mind to leave their emotions, leave their ideas, and then disappear.

Because it's only when you can see them clearly that you can do something about them. A lot of these voices, the very ephemeral ones, have a huge impact on the mind. They're there in the background, like a Greek chorus commenting on everything. It's just that they don't have a body that you can pinpoint. But you want to be able to recognize them because we come from a land of wrong view, we're born in a land of wrong view. Even if we're born in a Buddhist country, a lot of wrong view is sloshed around in lay society in Buddhist countries. Many of those views even get into the monastic order.

Ajaan Mun had this problem. When he decided to abide by the customs of the noble ones, to follow the Vinaya, follow the *dhutanga* practices, he got criticized by a lot of people—monks included—saying, "You're not following Thai customs. You're not following Laotian customs." His response was, "Thai customs, Laotian customs, are the customs of people with defilement. If you

want to become a noble one, you have to practice the customs and the traditions of the noble ones.”

So if it's true that even Buddhist countries are lands of wrong view, how much more so in a country like ours, where wealth is measured in terms of material things, power and strength are measured in military terms, physical strength. People's values are all skewed.

And of course, those values are not just out there. They're inside. The Buddha said that wrong view comes from two things: one is the voice of another—in other words, words you've heard other people say—and the other is your own inappropriate attention. You can hear something that's right, but there can be something in the mind that looks at it from the wrong way. Your greed gets in the way, your aversion gets in the way, your delusion gets in the way. You start asking the wrong questions. Voices of others don't stay outside. They come inside. And they're sloshing around in your head right now.

Now, the sources of right view are the voices of another—in other words, someone saying something that's going to inspire right view within you—and then your own appropriate attention: learning how to ask the right questions.

So you have to learn how to question the voices inside. A voice comes up and says something that would discourage you from the meditation. You have to ask: Where did that voice come from? Did the person who said it know what he or she was saying? Learn to recognize the source of the ideas sloshing around in the mind. That helps you get some distance from them. At the same time, you're applying appropriate attention to them. That's the cure.

I know in my own case, when I went to Thailand, my very first year, two years, up on the mountain there at Wat Dhammasathit, not much was happening, which meant I had whole days to do nothing but practice. A lot of voices came through my mind saying, “This is not right, you shouldn't be doing this, this is selfish, this is immature,” all the things that the mind would say to get in the way of the meditation. And as long as I viewed those voices as “my” voices or “my” thoughts, it was driving me crazy. Why was I divided against myself in this way? But then I began to realize: These are voices I picked up from outside, from people who didn't know anything about meditation, didn't know anything about this possibility. When I could see that they were coming from ignorance, it helped. It helped me gain some distance from them.

Of course, it didn't hurt that I had some physical distance as well. For those of us living in the society here, this is why we have to be extra careful about practicing restraint: what we look at and what we listen to, especially in terms of the media, the Internet. We have to be very careful about what we take in, because it starts reverberating around in the mind. And when something that's not skillful has gotten in the mind, we have to learn how to question it. Because appropriate attention in asking the right questions is basically telling

you that you have these choices—choices that your greed or aversion will often try to close off.

The defilements of the mind are like political parties. They try to limit the choices that are available to you so that you'll vote for someone who's in their interest and not in your interest, because you think that's your only choice. The Dhamma is here to say, "You do have the choice of acting more skillfully." This is why that factor for awakening called "analysis of qualities" comes down to seeing dark and bright qualities in the mind, recognizing what's skillful and what's not skillful—in other words, reminding you that you do have these choices. There are skillful choices always available.

The defilements try to close them off, saying that they're impossible or that you don't deserve the results of something skillful, you don't deserve to be happy. You have to remind yourself that the possibility of happiness is something that the Buddha always left open for everybody. He taught the end of suffering, and before he taught people how to put an end to suffering, he never asked them, "This suffering that you're experiencing right now: Is it something you deserved? Do you deserve to continue suffering? If you do deserve it, then I'm not going to teach you. It's only if you deserve to be happy that I'm going to teach you." The question of deserving or not deserving to suffer or to be happy never came up. It was always, suffering was a fact, it's something that we do. It's something we can learn how not to do. The choice is ours in the present moment.

Luang Puu Dune once said that the path was one thing clear through. In one sense, he meant that it was a matter of letting go from the beginnings of generosity all the way to the letting go of the most subtle defilements. It's also one thing clear through in the sense that we can always look for the skillful option, always have trust that there is a skillful option—that if there's anything unsatisfactory going on in the mind, there is another possibility. We don't have to go down those old paths. There are new paths open to us.

Of course, the new paths basically come down to the noble eightfold path, which is not all that new. The Buddha himself said that it was something he discovered that had been abandoned from the past. It wasn't something he made up. But for those of those who've grown up in wrong view, it is brand new.

And in another sense it's always new. It's right here in the present moment, always present, present, present. You have the choice to pull out of unskillful thoughts, pull out of unskillful beliefs, unskillful views right here in the present. So this possibility of always having a skillful option: That's the assumption that lies behind appropriate attention. The option for something totally desirable is there, a path to what is totally desirable, because that's what nibbana is: It's totally desirable. The path is there, and within each moment

there are options. We have choices. Don't believe the voices in the mind that say that you have no choice. The choices are there, the choices are open. Keep *that* voice in mind. That'll help open the way.