

Potentials for Refuge

November 4, 2020

When the instability of the world outside gets very obvious, that's when you appreciate having a refuge inside. Think of the time when the Buddha was about to pass away. He was the teacher who all those monks and nuns and laymen and laywomen had come to depend on, the one they'd gone to for refuge. Now he was going. So he reminded them, they should make *themselves* their refuge. He recommended that they do that by developing the establishings of mindfulness.

We have to remember that those establishings of mindfulness are his instructions on how you get the mind into concentration. So for our internal refuge, we're trying to get the mind to settle down, to be with the body as a whole.

The problem is that as you settle down it's like sitting in a chair. You find that under the seat cover there are objects. Some of them are sharp and pointy, and some of them are simply getting in the way. In other words, there are aches, pains, patterns of tension in the body, and it's the nature of the mind's early warning system that we focus on those first. But we have other potentials in the body as well.

Ajaan Lee made this comment several times in his writings, that we human beings have a lot of potentials, both in the body and in the mind, and we hardly make any use of them at all. In some cases, he was talking about the different psychic powers that can be developed as the mind settles in, but he was also talking about the potentials of the breath energy. The number-one principle of developing the potentials of the breath is that you focus on the comfortable breath. That refers both to the rhythm of the breath and to the parts of the body that you can make comfortable by the way you breathe. Do your best not to focus directly on the pains, directly on the patterns of tension. Focus around them, between them. There are parts of the body that are perfectly okay. As Ajaan Lee once said, if the whole body were in pain, you'd die. There's got to be someplace in here where you can get a sense of comfort, where you can settle in, and work around the pains, work around the solid parts that don't seem to respond to the breath.

And remember not to use those parts of the body to breathe. You may notice this sometimes that the tense parts of the body may be tense because you're using them to breathe. It may be that you're using them to breathe because, as you focus on the body, they seem to be the most obvious parts, so you use them to pump the breath in, pump the breath out.

So change your perception. This is a lot of what's required in developing the potentials of the body, the potentials of the mind: that you change your perception of what's going on. The first change is to remind yourself that the breath comes first. It's your primary experience of the body. Without the breath, you'd be paralyzed. Without the breath, you'd be totally numb. You wouldn't feel the body at all. We tend to have the perception that we first experience the solid parts of the body and then we pull the breath in. We use the solid parts to pull the breath in. We've got to change that perception. What you've got here is one big ball of breath energies, and at the moment they may be fighting among themselves, but when you realize that they are breath, and that they're not held in by the solid parts of the body—because the solid parts come later—they have more freedom to move. They can get more and more coordinated. And that sense—that comfortable breath energies in the body are coordinated breathing in, breathing out: That right there can give you a good place to stay.

As for the parts that aren't responding immediately, you don't focus on them. Focus around them, focus in between them, and then ask yourself about that perception of their solidity. How solid are they? Are they totally impregnable, or are they more porous? Think of them as atoms: There's space between the atoms, there's space *in* the atoms, so why can't the breath go through? Think of the breath as being even more subtle than the atoms.

And it doesn't stop with the skin. There's a cocoon of breath energy around the body. You can use that perception to help, so that when you're breathing in, the breath can come in anywhere, through the pores of the skin into any part of the body, and then can mingle, and then come back out again.

Ajaan Fuang once recommended one way of conceiving the breath coming in as that there's a pole of energy going from the top of the head, down through the head, down through the torso, down to the base of the spine, and as you breathe in, the energy's coming into that pole of energy from all directions; as you breathe out, it goes out in all directions.

So what you're doing is you're learning how to play with your perceptions, but play in a purposeful way, like an athlete playing a sport. You're not just playing around. You're playing to win. But you're also playing to enjoy it while you're doing it. As you play, you learn. This is where *vimamsa* comes in, one of the bases of success. On the one hand it means your powers of analysis: You work with the breath, you look at the results you're getting, and then you ask yourself: Are these as good as they can be? If they're not, then you have to ask yourself: What could be better?

Another aspect of *vimamsa* is another Pali term, *patibhana*, your ability to innovate, your ability to imagine. Bring that to bear. You can borrow some of Ajaan Lee's imaginings, you can borrow some of mine, but they should stimulate you: What about your own? Because the way we relate very directly to our breath energies in the body is something very personal, very individual, and because we don't talk about it that much, we tend to be pretty deprived in terms of our vocabulary, and in terms of our sense of what can be done here.

So learn how to verbalize to yourself about what's going on in terms of your relationship to the breath energy. Ask yourself some questions like this: Which is prior, the breath or the earth? And what could you do to make the breath prior, or to be in touch with the fact that the breath is prior? Then, from there, ask yourself other questions that make it more and more possible to adjust the energies in the body, adjust the things under the seat covers in the body, so that you can sit down here and relax into your seat. That's how the skills of breath meditation become your own.

In Thai they have a pun around the word *patipat*. To *patipat* something means to practice it, but to *patipat* a person means that you look after the person, to serve his or her needs. And as they often say, when you *patipat* the Dhamma, you also *patipat* yourself: When you practice the Dhamma, you're looking after yourself. So you want to be able to settle down right here, because after all, this is going to be your refuge. You look outside, and the world's pretty dismaying. You look inside, and it's also dismaying at times. But it doesn't have to stay that way. You have the potential for refuge right here, the potential for pleasure, rapture. After all, those are steps in the breath meditation: breathing in, breathing out sensitive to pleasure; breathing in, breathing out sensitive to rapture. There are potentials there. Look for them, learn how to develop them, and that's how you become your own refuge.