

The Power of the Mind

July 23, 2021

It happens all too often as you're meditating that you sit down, the breath is not comfortable, the body is not comfortable, and you get upset. That, of course, aggravates things.

You have to remember the Buddha's statement at the beginning of the Dhammapada: The mind or the heart is the forerunner of all things.

When you look at the body, you're looking at past karma. In other words, your old actions are being reflected back at you. If you don't like those reflections, you've got to make new reflections: skillful reflections out of skillful mind-states.

So, put the mind first. Then, from there, think of the breath as being first in terms of the body. And here again there's a problem. We tend to breathe around our pains, or up to our pains. We let the pains act as a wall or an obstacle to the breath.

But actually, the breath should be primary. There's nothing about pain that can block breath. It's just a perception, so you've got to change your perceptions.

The mind comes before the breath; the breath comes before all the other elements in the body. Think in those terms. So, as Ajaan Suwat would say every time we would meditate as a group, "Okay, *dress* your mind." Or: "fix your mind." The word in Thai is *taeng*, which is the word they use for dressing the body or for fixing food. In other words, get the mind into the right shape: happy to be here, confident that you can make the meditation go well, so that you're not reacting to things happening in the body, you're not reacting to things that have happened during the day.

You're going to take advantage of the fact that you *do* have freedom of choice right now. You can do something new, something skillful, and it starts by having that confident sense that things *do* start with the mind. Regardless of what mood the mind has been in through the course of the day, you can change it. After all, as the Buddha said, nothing can change as quickly as the mind. So, take advantage of that tendency. Feel free to put it in a good mood.

Remember that the Buddha never defines mind. It's one of those terms that never gets defined. He doesn't say anything about the three characteristics or the opposite of the three characteristics with regard to the mind. He said that if you define yourself, you limit yourself. So, there's a very good reason why he doesn't define "mind."

The word *citta*, mind or heart, is closely related to *ceteti*, a verb that means *to will*, so that is one of its functions. But there's also a knowing quality to it, a brightness to it, that allows you to observe yourself. So, instead of trying to define the mind, try to notice: What can you *do* with the mind? The less you define it, the more opportunities you leave open.

So, what function should the mind perform now? It should be determined to stay here to get to know itself. You do that by looking into the mirror of the breath. Here you can think of Ajaan Lee's image of the breath as the mirror for the mind. You make sure that the mirror is polished and smooth, so that you can see things clearly. And how do you smooth the mirror? You smooth the mind. This is where the analogy breaks down.

The important point is that everything starts with the mind. So, when the breath is not going well, don't tell yourself that you're trapped by a bad breath. Just say, "That's what being reflected back to me, but I can change my mind and get something new reflected back." It takes some time. Karma doesn't always act as quickly as you'd like. But the breath is one of the first things to respond to acts of the mind, and it responds quickly. It's simply a matter of having the confidence that you've got the mind and you've got the breath here and you can do what you want with them.

As for any sensations in the body that you label as obstacles, remind yourself that the labels are optional. Even though the body is solid, there is within that solidity a porous quality. The atoms of your bones are mostly space. I read a book a while back that took you through the universe from the largest frame of reference to the smallest. It started out by depicting the whole thing, and then on each succeeding page would divide the scale of the distance by a factor of 10,000 per page, until you got to the atom. From the atom, it went even smaller: You saw the atom and then there were pages to depict the space between the innermost electron and the nucleus, and for page after page after page there was nothing. Atoms are mainly space. So, what in there can act as an obstacle to the breath?

Hold that perception in mind and it gives you some freedom. This is a good principle to keep in mind.

Here we are at the beginning of the rains retreat. It's the time for us to think about how we're going to use the retreat to get something special out of it. Of course, with Covid we've been living as if it's been a rains retreat for more than a year now. But now is the time to settle down and think about the nine months we've been through since the last retreat, and now we have another three months ahead of us. What do you want to make special out of that?

Remember that the power of your mind is what's going to make it special, the determination you have. Remember the insight the Buddha had at the

night of his awakening about the power of intention. Intention is what drives the universe. If you get your intentions right, you can go to good states, or, better than that, get out of the cycle entirely. The mind has that potential. But we tend to strap it down, focus it on little things that are not all that important. They don't lead to anything worthwhile. Let's focus it on something that really is worthwhile. We live in this universe that's basically meaningless, pointless. Instead of seeing that as alienating, we see it as an opportunity. We can give our lives meaning; we can give a point to our lives by what we focus on.

The Buddha suggests that the best thing to focus on is this question of why we create suffering for ourselves even though we don't want the suffering. That question is what spurs us to try to develop the path that will take us through our intentions to something beyond.

So which aspects of the path need work? This is where each of us has to look at into our own hearts and minds. The path breaks down into triple training: heightened virtue, heightened mind, heightened discernment. Okay, which part of that training is not yet heightened in you? Does your virtue need to be heightened? Does your concentration? Your discernment? What's lacking? You've got three months to settle down, living in a community of other people who are also practicing. What do you want to make out of this time? Choose wisely and then try to stick with it.

Those are the first two elements of a good determination: discernment and truth. Then you add the other two. One is generosity, the ability to relinquish things that get in the way; and the other is calm. The mind tends to get worked up when it has to stick with something that challenges it, that forces it to give things up that it likes. If you allow it to stay worked up, then you're not going to last for very long.

The key to any determination is to be calm. That doesn't mean you're sluggish. But it means that whatever comes up, you don't let yourself get knocked off course. When you think about the things that you have to give up, you immediately learn how to solve the problem. And when you think about things that you have to do that are going to stretch you, you think of ways to give yourself pep talks, encouragement. In other words, you have to learn how to *correct* your own mind—another good reason why the mind is not clearly defined. So, take advantage of the fact that there are a lot of minds in there, lots of different voices. You want to learn how to side with the skillful ones that want to see that determination through.

So as the ajaans keep saying, the mind can be amazing. The reason we don't see it as amazing is because we keep it strapped down. We focus it on other things that don't require all that much effort, don't require all that much discernment—in other words, don't require the qualities of good

determination. And because we focus it on ordinary things, the mind seems very ordinary, but it is possible to find something in there that is extraordinary. So, look inside to see what resources you have to draw on. Develop the good ones and you'll find that they're *ready* to be developed. Just make sure you don't underestimate the potentials you have within you.

Remember that the mind comes first. And even though it may take time to put the energy out into the world so that the good energy is reflected back, accept that fact as a good sport. What you see getting reflected back is old karma, sometimes *very* old karma. But have some trust that the big issue is not the old karma, it's the new karma you're creating now. As the Buddha said, this is what makes the difference whether you are going to suffer right now or not. You don't have to go back and wait for all your old karma to be straightened out; you don't have to be tied down by your old karma.

Remember the image of the salt crystal. Your karma from the past is the crystal of salt, but what makes the difference is the quality of your mind right now. Is it the little tiny cup of water or is it the large river? That's something you can *choose*. So, when you have that choice available, why not make the most of it?