

Happy to Be Here

February 19, 2022

Ajaan Suwat would often begin his meditation instructions by saying to put yourself in the right mood. Bring an attitude of respect, confidence, conviction that you're doing a good thing here. This may seem strange. Often we think that only after we get the mind in concentration will it be in a good mood, but that's not the case.

When the Buddha talked about it, he said that you start out with a sense of joy, a sense of gladness, and that provides a place where the mind can settle down. You want to be happy to be here. He also said that that sense of joy comes from conviction, and conviction for him meant not only believing the Buddha's teachings and believing that this is a good thing to be here meditating, but also to follow through with the precepts, follow through the teachings, and see that, yes, they really do give rise to a sense of well-being: the happiness of generosity, the happiness of virtue. You want to reflect on that and bring that attitude into the meditation. You're going to be providing food for the mind, and you don't want to force the food on yourself. You want to lay the food out in front of the mind and wait for it to be interested in eating.

So you have to present the food in an attractive way. This is one of the reasons why we work with the breath. Try long breathing, short breathing, fast, slow, heavy, light. If it takes a whole hour to find a way of breathing that feels good, well, it's an hour well spent. An important part of understanding your mind is understanding what it likes.

The Buddha gives the analogy of a cook. The cook provides food for a king or a king's minister, and then he notices: What does the king or king's minister like? Which food does he reach for? Which food does he praise? Make more of that. When the cook does that, he gets a reward.

Ajaan Lee expands on this analogy, saying that sometimes the mind will like one thing today, and something else the next day. Sometimes the king likes salty food today and sweet food tomorrow. So be prepared for that. Don't think that one way of breathing will be the magic bullet, that the mind will settle down every time you breathe in that way. Sometimes it likes long breathing, and sometimes it doesn't. It prefers short breathing. Okay, you're able to provide that. And see it as a good thing that you have the time, you have the opportunity to do

this: to get to know your own mind, to get to know your own body from within.

You're dealing with the energies in the body, and for a lot of us in the West, that's a huge unknown territory. So here's your chance to get to know them, because they will have an effect on the health of the body, and through the health of the body they'll have an effect on the mind. Here again, you need to have the right touch. You can't go in and just force the breath to be this way, force it to be that way. Ask the body, "What would you like right now?" and see how it responds.

At first, it may not respond in any particular way at all. You can nudge it, trying longer breathing for a while, then shorter, and then ask yourself: Which feels better? Deeper, more shallow: Which feels better? Faster, slower: Which feels better? If you're not sure, go back and make the comparison again.

An hour is a lot of time, and here you are trying to develop a friendship inside. You can't rush friendship. It takes time to develop trust, to develop a sense of knowing one another, getting a sense of which things you can joke about, which things you can't joke about, which things you have to take seriously, which things the friend particularly likes. Over time, you also get a sense of what the friend can do for you.

You can't be in a hurry to be calm. So be patient as you put the mind in a calm mood, with whatever Dhamma theme helps calm you down, and then bring that calm mind to the concentration.

In doing this, you're employing all the different kinds of fabrication the Buddha talked about. There's the breath itself, with its bodily fabrication, and then there's the way you talk to yourself, which is verbal fabrication. Here you talk to yourself in a calm and soothing way. Then you take an interest in the breath, realizing that the breath and the breath energies in the body have lots of potentials. They can do a lot of good things for you, but you have to be interested and you have to be observant to make the most of them. Remind yourself that this is what you've got to do.

Then there's mental fabrication: the perceptions you use to hold the breath in mind. Have a sense of how the breath can flow in the different parts of the body—down through the spine, down through the legs, all along the nerves, all along the blood vessels. If you've ever seen any diagrams of the body inside, see if they can give you some guidance. Try to notice, given that that's the way the body is, in what ways are you holding it in the wrong way, forcing things in the wrong way? In what way are you pushing things out of balance, and how can you bring

them back into balance?

All that has to do with perception together with the directed thought and evaluation. The purpose is to give rise to a feeling of well-being, a feeling of ease that allows you to settle down, happy to be here.

Now, as you get more and more skilled at this, you begin to get more and more sensitive to these processes of fabrication. For the time being, the main emphasis is on giving a lot of attention to the breath, being very careful about how you talk to yourself about the breath, how you talk to yourself about the meditation, how it's going. Always try to be encouraging.

You're accomplishing two things at once: on the one hand, getting the mind to settle down, and two, getting more and more sensitive to these processes of fabrication in the mind.

After all, they're things we're doing all the time. The breath—we're breathing in and out all the time. Directed thought and evaluation—we're talking to ourselves all the time. We have lots of perceptions flashing through the mind, and feelings all the time.

We're jerry-rigging our experience out of these things, and because we tend to do it in ignorance, that's why we suffer. But now we're doing it with knowledge. We see what we're doing, and we're trying to do it well. As you get more sensitive here, you also begin to get more sensitive to the ways you talk to yourself outside of the meditation, the way you visualize things outside of the meditation, even the way you breathe outside of the meditation. You begin to get a sense of how you can do all that more skillfully.

So the path is not simply a matter of seeing things as they already are and just accepting things as they are. You're learning to manipulate the different potentials you have in here, putting them together in a way that allows you to see things more clearly. The way things already are is pretty murky. Especially if you think they are just the way they are, and they have to be the way they are: That's very murky, because they don't have to be that way.

This is a lesson you can learn as you experiment. As you get better and better in the concentration, you gain a sense of how you can manipulate these different potentials, so that they can give rise to a sense of well-being. Whether you're *in* concentration or just on the verge of concentration, whether you're formally sitting, or doing walking meditation, or just walking around not specifically for the purpose of meditating, but you're walking around doing things: You see more clearly what's going on. You can see what potentials you have here.

Some of the potentials are limited by your past karma, but there's a lot of room for play, a lot of room for experimentation. This is why the Buddha's basic principle of causality is so

important: Some of the things you experience right now come from past intentions, but not everything. To experience the present moment requires present intentions as well, to take those potentials from the past and turn them into an actual experience.

So we're learning how to become more and more sensitive to how we do that, right here, right now. The best way to develop sensitivity is to try to do it as well as you can. And the best way to judge things fairly is to approach this with an attitude of calm and confidence, that this is a good thing you're doing here.

On the one hand, the Buddha does talk about having a sense of urgency in doing it, but still, you don't want to be sloppy. You don't want to push things in a way that they push back. You want to figure out: "How can I make the mind want to stay here? How can I make the mind happy to be here? How can I induce the breath to be eager to go down through the body?" You can't push it. If you push it, it gets very uncomfortable. You *allow* it. And when it's allowed, it seems like it wants to go.

So you have to bring the right attitude to the meditation, and that includes getting yourself happy to be here. You can't force someone to be happy, but you provide the conditions, and the happiness comes. It seems to come on its own, but it comes from the conditions—with a lot of patience and a lot of calm.

It's not the case that we're going to gain our insights by pushing the mind to extremes. The real insights come when things are balanced. It's going to take a while to find that point of balance, so approach it as something that you want to do. And as with anything you want to do, you want to make sure that your desires don't get in the way. They're there to motivate you. When you focus them on the causes, the desired effects will have to come.