

## *Turtle Mind*

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Ajaan Suwat would occasionally comment on the paradoxical nature of the mind in concentration. On the one hand, it's very tender, very sensitive. On the other, it's tough and resilient. The image that comes to mind is a turtle. A turtle's body is very, very weak and gentle, so it needs a hard shell to protect it. As meditators, we have to get very sensitive to the mind, the breath, how we feel the body from within, so that we can understand what's going on in the mind. After all, some very subtle things are happening that can lead to major results. If we're not sensitive, we don't sense them.

But we live in a rough and tumble world. There are people out there who would be all too happy just to kill to get what they want. It's a world of a lot of turmoil. So, we have to protect ourselves from that so that we're not damaged by it.

One way to do that is to develop all four of the brahmaviharas. The first three are the sensitive ones: "May all beings be happy. May those who are suffering be free from their suffering. May those who are happy not be deprived of their happiness." There's an attitude of tenderness to all beings in those thoughts.

But then there's the principle of equanimity: "All beings are the owners of their actions." These are the basic facts, and you have to learn to be okay with the basic facts: knowing when to apply equanimity, when to apply thoughts of goodwill, compassion, or empathetic joy. The first three are there to motivate your actions in thought, word, and deed. The equanimity is to remind you: This is the way the world is.

So you want to be careful in your actions. But you also have to realize that there are a lot of things out there that you can't change, because of either your own past actions, or other people's actions, past or present. So, you can't go looking for your happiness out there.

This leads to a second way to develop turtle mind, which is more connected with the four noble truths. The Buddha says we suffer in the fact that we cling. The word for clinging, *upadana*, can also mean to take sustenance, to feed. For most of us, this is our relationship to the world: We're trying to feed on what the world has to offer, hoping to find good nourishment; sometimes getting what we want, sometimes not getting what we want. But that's our basic relationship. When the Buddha says, "All beings are sustained by food," he's basically saying that this is what defines us as beings: that we're feeding on things inside and out.

So we want to change that relationship in two ways. One is to find good things inside that we can feed on, so that we don't have to feed on bad things inside or on anything outside. The other is to make our relationship with the world one in which we're giving.

You'll notice that this is how the Buddha's teachings start when he gives his graduated discourse, the basic steps that get you ready for the four noble truths. The discourse starts with giving, and then goes to virtue. Virtue, too, is a form of giving. As the Buddha says, you give safety to others. When you develop the brahmaviharas in your search for merit, again, you're radiating. You're not taking in. Ultimately, of course, when you get into meditation and your mind gets still enough so that you can gain some insight, insight is largely a matter of letting go.

So instead of taking in, you give. And because you're giving, you're not subject so much to things outside. It's like going to a place where you know the food is bad. But that doesn't bother you because you've got plenty of good food inside and you're not thinking of eating it all. You're thinking of handing out some of your good food. If you can think in those ways, then you can live in the world and yet not be so oppressed by the world.

But you do need that source of something inside that you can then give out. This is why we meditate.

You can think about the goodness, the happiness that comes from being able to give and being virtuous. That can sustain you for a while. But it's a lot easier to sustain yourself if you've got concentration. After all, concentration is the food of the path, and as you're used to radiating energy out, you find that as you get more and more sensitive to the breath energy throughout the body, you have a clear sense of the oneness of that energy.

You're developing what the Buddha calls mindfulness immersed in the body, where your awareness fills the body. You become more impervious to outside influences, especially energies coming from outside, because your energy in the body is full. The image the Buddha gives for an untrained mind is of throwing a piece of rock into a lump of clay. The rock goes into the clay very easily. As for mindfulness immersed in the body, the image is of a hardwood door. You throw a ball of string at it, and it's not going to make a dent. That's the quality of energy you want to have: the solidity of the door. You can be in the world, but the world can't make a dent when you have a sense of energy filling the body.

When you have the right attitude—that you're here not to take or to feed on the world, because you've got food inside; you're here to give, you're here to give out—that's when you can be safe. After all, we're going in the direction of not even being a being anymore. That doesn't mean annihilation. It just means that we're not taking on this identity of somebody who has to feed. So, we

practice for that by thinking of changing the direction around, so that good things are coming out of us.

The more the good things can come out of us, the stronger we'll be. Even as we're sensitive inside, the energy we give to the world is a strong energy.

This energy acts as your shell, enabling you to live in this world and yet still develop a sensitivity inside. It allows you to understand your mind, to get over your delusions, and not be subject to your greed, aversion, and all the other unskilful mental states there are, and yet at the same time not be harmed by the world.