

## *Dwelling in Emptiness*

*April 9, 2022*

Ajaan Suwat used to say that if you're meditating and you want to see the first noble truth, you don't have to look very far: Wherever there's a disturbance in the mind, wherever the mind is not still, take that as an example of the first noble truth, the truth of stress. If the mind is full of disturbances, it's going to be pretty muddy. It's not going to be clear.

This is one of the reasons why we try to make the mind as still as possible, so that things can begin to separate out. The Buddha talks about this when he describes emptiness as a dwelling. We hear a lot about emptiness as an attribute of things, an attribute of the six senses and their objects. And the Buddha does talk about it as an attribute of the six senses, too. In that context, it means "empty of self." The eyes, ears, nose, tongue, body, even your mind should be seen as empty of self.

But then there's emptiness as a dwelling, and that's something different. The Buddha once said that he dwelled in emptiness. In that case, "emptiness" meant "empty of disturbance." What this requires is that you get the mind in a quiet place and appreciate the fact that it's empty of the disturbances that would be there if you were in a noisy place. For example, you come out here to the monastery. You're away from the issues of your family, away from issues of society. Learn to appreciate that.

But then, being here, there are still the disturbances here. So how to bring the mind to concentration? Get it focused on one thing, like the breath while, as the formula for mindfulness says, you're "putting aside greed and distress with reference to the world." All those disturbances related to the world right now—you can put them aside. They yell at you about how important they are, but remember, the Buddha's perspective is that what you're doing, how you're handling your mind in the present moment is more important. So really focus in here. After a while, the issues of the world begin to go far away. Learn how to appreciate that: the fact that there's even less disturbance in the mind.

But there is still some disturbance. There's the directed thought, the evaluation of the first jhana. For a while, you can't let them go. You have to put up with that disturbance, because you're trying to fit the mind together with its object, the breath, and make the most of the breath to give rise to a sense of well-being and ease. You need directed thought and evaluation to do that. This is an important

lesson in the practice: You don't let go of things wholesale. You realize what you've got to hold on to for the time being in order to let go skillfully.

This is why the Buddha outlines the different stages of concentration through the jhanas. Sometimes you hear the forest ajaans saying that jhana is not necessary. But what they're talking about is the jhana of the commentaries, the jhana of the Visuddhimagga, which is an intense, trance-like state where there's no thinking, no awareness even of your five senses. You're still aware of the mind, but the focus is so intense that there's no ability to step back and contemplate it.

We have to remember that the Buddha's main explanation of how you get to know the Dhamma is through committing to the practice and then reflecting on it. Emptiness as a dwelling requires that you be able to reflect. And that's the kind of concentration that all the ajaans teach: You get the mind really, really still, and then you pull out a little bit. Watch the mind in its stillness and ask yourself: What disturbance is still there?

As you're getting the mind into concentration, the first thing you're letting go of is unskillful mental states. There's a sense of ease, even a sense of rapture, the Buddha says, that comes from being secluded from those states. As you're thinking about and adjusting the breath, totally absorbed in what you're doing right here, you get to the point where everything is really balanced.

Then you can let go of the directed thought and evaluation, and the mind stays. Ajaan Fuang's image is of casting something in concrete: As long as the concrete hasn't set yet, you don't take away the forms. But once it has set, you can take away the forms, and the concrete stays right where it is. Learn how to appreciate that: Your mind is now empty of directed thought and evaluation.

But there's still some disturbance: The sense of rapture can sometimes get too intense. So you learn how to focus on a more subtle level of energy in the body, and the rapture fades away. In this way, you go through the different levels, allowing these different perceptions and fabrications in the mind to change and peel away. Each time you do that, you try to stay settled in the new state of quiet for a while. As you get the mind more and more still, each time you come to a level of stillness where you've never been before, it seems really wide open, light, totally undisturbed.

But watch it carefully. Stay there. As your sensitivities adjust, you begin to sense disturbances you hadn't seen before. This is why it's good to do this step by step by step, because otherwise, the disturbances are like a paper covered with scribbles. You can't read the scribbles because they're all scribbled over one another. But if you take one layer of scribbling away, and one layer away, one layer away, you begin to see things a lot more clearly. You begin to see different levels of

stress, and you can see what you're doing to cause them. When you can see that, you let go of what you're doing to cause them, and they grow still.

In this way, you're getting into concentration at the same time you're exercising your discernment. You've got calm and tranquility on the one hand, and you've got insight developing on the other. They work together like this.

The important thing is, if you want to see subtle levels of disturbance, subtle levels where the first and second noble truths are still playing out, you've got to get the mind as still and as undisturbed as possible. And appreciate that lack of disturbance.

That's what the emptiness is all about—emptiness as a dwelling—because one of the hard parts of the practice is learning to appreciate the idea of total unbinding, total release, as something really good. A lot of people are scared of it. But as you learn how to appreciate the undisturbed mind—the extent to which you *can* make it undisturbed—your mind inclines more and more to looking for even greater levels of being undisturbed.

That's the kind of emptiness that's really valuable. Ultimately, the Buddha said, *his* level of an emptiness dwelling was undisturbed by passion, undisturbed by aversion, and undisturbed by delusion. That's the direction in which we're headed. As you learn how to appreciate lack of disturbance of the mind as a really good thing, you'll be more and more inclined to want to go in that direction, too. This is how you dwell in emptiness. And you want to make it a place where you really do feel comfortable dwelling.

So approach it step by step like this. Ajaan Lee's image is of throwing a rock in a smelter: As you raise the temperature, the different metals separate out. First the tin separates out, then the lead, then the silver, then the gold. In the same way, as the mind gets more and more still, the different levels of fabrication fall away: Verbal fabrication falls away as you enter the second jhana. Bodily fabrication, the in-and-out breath, falls away as you enter the fourth. You start going into the formless jhanas and the different levels of perception: The perception of space is more gross than the perception of consciousness. The perception of consciousness is more gross than the perception of nothingness.

If you can see them separate out one by one like that, that's how this dwelling in emptiness leads both to calm and insight at the same time: and then beyond the calm and insight to release. That's how you learn how to appreciate the direction in which we're going.