

Still

April 12, 2022

As you begin to settle in, make a survey of the body and make a survey of your mind.

In terms of the body, make sure that everything is balanced. You're not leaning forward, back, left, right. You're facing straight ahead. You relax the different joints. You might start at the top of the head and go down, down, down, down, down. Make sure that everything's relaxed, but in place. In other words, anything that would pull you out of alignment, you relax.

Make a survey of your mind. What state is it in right now? Is it frenetic? Is it sleepy? Is it tired? As the Thai ajaans would say, make sure that it too is not leaning forward or back, left or right: forward to the future, back to the past, left and right to things you like or don't like. Just try to be aware right here.

When everything is in place, then you focus on the breath. Remember to think of the breath not so much as the air, but as the energy flow in the body, because that's what you experience first in the body, and that's what you can experience anywhere in the body. In the modern world with all our screens, we tend to be focused in our eyes. Then, from our eyes, we have the idea that we're looking at the rest of the body through our eyes. But to counteract that idea, just focus on the eyes in themselves. Think of the breath energy coming in, going through the eyelids, around the eyeballs. Think of the blood being able to flow there smoothly. This is the area of the body that tends to be used most as we think. Little tiny muscles in the blood vessels around the eyes contract and expand as we think. So think of them all opening up so that the blood can flow freely and nourish them. In other words, instead of using the eyes to look at the rest of your body, you're using the rest of the body to look at your eyes.

From there, think of backing into the rest of the body, rather than looking at it through the front of the eyes: back into the neck, back into the back, down the legs. When things get very still, just stay there. Protect that. Part of the mind will say, "What's next?" After a while, you'll have to say, "There's this." If it's still, protect it. As for what level of jhana it is: I remember that when Ajaan Fuang was teaching, he never talked about the jhanas. Ajaan Lee would talk about them, but that was because he was teaching at a time when the party line in Bangkok was that the time for jhana was passed. The time, of course, for nibbana was passed. It was part of the government policy to get monks to teach in schools. So to counteract that belief, Ajaan Lee had to talk very explicitly about jhana.

But Ajaan Fuang may have noticed that when people think about jhana, they start comparing their jhanas with other people's jhanas. So to avoid that,

he wouldn't talk about jhana. He handed out the book that talked about jhana. You could look for yourself. But he would never certify you as having this, that, or another jhana. It was up to you to decide. And I found that by staying with him, it was good to think of your identification of this or that state as post-it notes that, as you got to know the territory better, you can move around. But you really don't have to put notes on it.

I started noticing that when the mind settles down, it settles down in different ways. Sometimes it settles down really solidly, very quickly. Other times it takes a while to drift down into place. Once it's there, you'll find that it's natural to stay centered in one part or another. You want to get good at focusing on several parts because there are times when focusing up in the head can lead to headaches. So, you move your attention down. Again, try not to have the sense that you're up in the head looking down into the chest, say. Try to be *in* the chest. Try to be in the abdomen, wherever you choose as your spot. Notice that there's an awareness already there. You don't have to impose your notions of breath on it. Just tell yourself, "Whatever I feel there, that must be breath. What does that tell me about breath?" Learn from that rather than telling it what it's supposed to do.

When you have that attitude of being receptive to what's going on, it's a lot easier to settle in, in a way that both the body and the mind feel like they fit together. Then find the right balance in how to maintain that. You have to stay attentive but not tense. Be as consistent as you can. In the beginning, the concentration tends to have a quality of coming in phrases, like phrases in music, because the breath comes in phrases. It comes in, stops, goes out, stops. But remember there's also a quality of breath energy in the body that's very continuous. And there's an awareness that matches that continuous breath. See if you can get in touch with that awareness, and try not to divide it up into phrases. Make sure that the whole body is aware, or your awareness throughout the whole body has a chance to show itself. You're in touch with it.

And then, maintain.

As Ajaan Fuang once said, there are three stages to the practice: *doing it*, in other words, getting the mind to settle in; then *maintaining it*, learning how to keep it; and then *putting it to use*.

Maintaining it involves learning how to talk to yourself while you're keeping at it. It's a very minimal kind of talking. Sometimes there are sentences, and sometimes there's just a word, an image. Or you find a particular sensation that feels really good and continuous, and you just tell yourself, "Stay here." Learn how to get nourishment from it. That technique of letting the blood flow all around the eyes: That nourishes all the little muscles that are used for thinking. You can do the same thing with the blood vessels in different parts of the body, too. Let everything be as full as possible, as open as

possible, so that the blood can flow well, and everything gets nourished. And again, resist any tendency that the mind has to say “Well, what’s next? When are we going to get use this to gain insight?” For the time being, just learn how to maintain. Hover around it. Keep it here. Have some respect for your concentration.

We have that chant where the Buddha talks about respect. It’s interesting that he talks about respect for the training—which means, of course, the triple training: heightened virtue, heightened mind, i.e., concentration, and heightened discernment—and then he adds respect for concentration. Because this is already included in the training, why does he have to add concentration again? It’s because people tend to overlook it, not to value it. After all, we’ve read so much about how you don’t want to get stuck on concentration, that the real business in the meditation is the discernment.

But a lot of discernment comes from maintaining the concentration. The part of the mind that’s antsy to move on: When you can learn how to relax it, the antsiness, the tension, dissolves away. You can see that it was getting in the way of some interesting insights arising. So tune in, and stay tuned in.

Think of what Dogen had to say about the third and the fourth noble truths. He didn’t say that the path was the goal, but he did say that the activity of developing the path and the activity of realizing the cessation of suffering are the same thing. In other words, you don’t have to second guess the path. You don’t have to look down the path and ask, “When’s the next stage going to come?” You focus right here. As right here develops, you’ll see what you need to see.

Ajaan Chah has an image where he says the path is like a mango. You look at a mango and you say, “Where’s the beginning? Where’s the end?” It’s not obvious—and that’s the point. You get the whole mango and just let the whole mango develop. In its wholeness, it’ll develop in directions you may not have expected. That’s where the mind on the path is very different from a mango. You can pretty much expect what mangoes are going to do. But the path develops in ways that take you to places you didn’t expect. As the Buddha said, we practice “to attain the as yet unattained, to realize the as yet unrealized.” But it’s all right here. Simply allow it to develop. Once you’ve got this stage, then the skill of *using it* for the sake of discernment will become a lot clearer.

So. Patience. Steadiness. Consistency. Learn to regard those as real virtues.