

A Divine Seat

June 2, 2023

A common meditation instruction is that you should sit with whatever comes up. But the important thing is that you have a good place to sit, a solid place to sit, so that whatever comes up doesn't blow you away. Some things come up and they're very strong. You need to be able to resist their strength, to have a way of counteracting them, and in some cases, when you can, taking them apart.

The Buddha talks about getting the mind into concentration as a divine seat. Get the mind into the first jhana, and there's a sense of ease and rapture filling the body. You can work it through the body. When you're sitting in that state, you're in a divine seat. So create a divine seat for yourself tonight. Focus on the breath. Notice where you feel it. Remember that mindfulness and concentration are things that you construct. You don't just sit here waiting for them to come on their own. You have to give rise to them.

As the Buddha said, you direct your thoughts to the breath and then you evaluate. On the one hand, you evaluate the breath. How does it feel? What kind of breathing would feel good now? This is an area where you can experiment. He calls the breath *bodily fabrication*, and the word *fabrication* is often equated with intention. There's an intentional element in the way you breathe. For most of us, we let it go on automatic pilot. But even when it's on automatic pilot, there's something inside you that directs it now to come in, now to go out.

You want to find where those directions are coming from, so experiment. See what feels good right now. You can try soft breathing, heavy breathing, fast, slow, deep, shallow, long, or short. Or simply pose the question to the mind: What would feel really good right now? See how the body responds. Open it up to all kinds of possibilities.

This is one of the duties of meditation: to expand your imagination as to what's possible. You have potentials here in the body right now, potentials in the mind right now, which, if you activate them, can give rise to a sense of intense well-being. Where are those potentials and how do you activate them? If you can get your imagination seized by this question, attracted by this question, so that you become inquisitive, that can fill up the space in the present moment so that random thoughts, old emotions, don't have an opening to come barging in.

So take an interest in this. What breathing really would feel good right now? When it feels good, how do you let that sense of good feeling spread around the body? Ajaan Lee recommends having it come down the spine and out the legs, but

there are other passages where he says to think of it coming from the feet and from the hands and into the body; from the soles of the feet coming up the legs, up the spine. That gives you something else to experiment with. When you breathe in, what direction should the breath flow so that it feels good inside, feels solid, so that the body is in harmony?

You find that you're working with three things here. Bodily fabrication, as I said, and then verbal fabrication: directed thought and evaluation. That's the Buddha's term for how you talk to yourself: the comments you make, the questions you ask, the answers you give to those questions. You direct your attention someplace and then you discuss it with yourself.

Then there are perceptions and feelings, which are mental fabrications. Perceptions are the mental images you hold in mind, like the image of the breath energy going down the spine, or the image of the breath coming up through the soles of the feet or filling the chest, bathing the body. Think of the breath as being all around you. We do have this tendency to think of the mind or ourselves being in one part of the body, looking at the breath in another part of the body, in front of us. But the breath can also flow all around you. Hold that perception in mind and see what it does.

So we've got bodily fabrication, what the Buddha calls verbal fabrication, the directed thought and evaluation, and then mental fabrication, perceptions and feelings. Here the feelings are feelings of either pleasure, pain, neither pleasure nor pain. You're trying to emphasize the potential for pleasure here. Here again, the Buddha says, feelings can come and go willy-nilly, but you can also induce them by the way you focus on them, by the way you place labels on them. You've probably noticed this yourself. If there's a pain that comes in, and you don't know where it's coming from, you get upset by it. But if a masseur or masseuse massaging you created the same pain, you might actually enjoy it. That's because of the perceptions you have around it.

So learn how to perceive the feelings in the body in a positive way. This way, you create your safe space, you create your divine seat, so that when emotions do come up—and they will when the mind gets quiet, when it doesn't have the usual surface disturbances that you generate as you go through the day, which keep a lot of subconscious things down under in the basement—you won't get knocked over by them.

When the surface disturbances are gone, then what's down in the bottom of the lake can come welling up. Sometimes it's good, sometimes it's not so good. In the beginning, it's hard to get a handle on it, so you just hold on to whatever part

of the body you can make comfortable through the way you breathe or the way you focus on it, and just hang out there for a while.

But then you have to realize that these emotions coming up are made out of those same kinds of fabrications that you're using to construct your concentration. That gives you a handle on them. You can begin to analyze them. When a negative emotion comes up, how does it change the way you breathe? Can you change it back to something good? And how are you talking to yourself? What images do you have in your mind? What feelings in the body and feelings in the mind are you focusing on? Can you change the focus? Can you change the inner conversation? You'll notice that a lot of emotions have a story aligned to them. They've been through the mind many times before and it's always the same story, again and again, and it seems designed to get you upset.

When I was first staying with Ajaan Fuang, meditating up on the mountain alone, a lot of issues from childhood, my teenage years, college years, came welling up into the mind. At first I was upset. I wanted to get the mind on the breath, but this other stuff was coming in to interfere. But then I began to realize that this stuff had to be dealt with, and what I had to do was get a new perspective on it. Ajaan Fuang was helpful. He would say, "Look at it in terms of your karma, the things that happen to you that you felt victimized by. Maybe you had that kind of karma from the past." That thought changes the story. You realize that these issues go back and back and back, and there's so much back and forth that we have no idea how things began.

There's that famous story in the commentaries of one woman chasing another woman around, wanting to kill her child. The woman with the child goes running into the monastery where the Buddha is staying and bows down to his feet. The other woman comes up and is sort of hovering in the background. The Buddha asks, "Do you realize how many of each other's children you've killed over your many, many lifetimes? You've been through all this back and forth, back and forth, back and forth. You have no memory of who began this back and forth. Why continue it?"

So realize, when things come welling up, that you don't know the whole story, you know only part of it. Then the question is, do you want to continue it? Why? Part of the mind says, "I want things to get settled, to come to closure." But there's no closure in the world, aside from entering into nibbana. Still, you can have some closure when you say, "Okay, I just don't want to go back and forth on this anymore." Looking at the events, looking at the storyline, when you change the storyline like this, makes it a different story, and it has a different impact on the mind.

What you're trying to do is remove all the Velcro. Then you spread lots of goodwill to everybody involved: yourself, the other people. As the Buddha said, when you realize you've done something unskillful, the best response is to recognize it as unskillful, and make the resolve that you're not going to repeat it. That's going to have a good impact on your karma right there. The fact that you recognize something wrong as wrong: That's right view. The resolve not to repeat it, that shows a change of heart. That's right resolve. Then you spread goodwill to everybody involved: yourself, the other people. You spread it to yourself so that you don't keep on harassing yourself with these thoughts. You spread it to the other people involved, and then you spread it to all people you might get involved with in the future. That disentangles a lot of the stories.

Because they are constructs, too. Just because something comes welling up doesn't mean it's any more natural than anything else. It's a construct. What we're trying to do here is learn how to construct better things. The seats that we've been constructing in the past are pretty bad. Here the Buddha is teaching what he calls the divine seat: divine right concentration. When you're well established here, then things don't blow you around.

Ajaan Chah, one of the forest masters, has a related image. He says it's as if you're in a house, there's just one seat in the house, and you're in the seat. As long as you don't let anybody else lure you out of the seat, you're fine. You're the one in charge. You can tell everyone else to come, tell them to go. Everybody else is standing around waiting for your orders. If one of them slips into the seat, though, you're in trouble. They're giving the orders then.

It's like that famous story in Thailand. There's a character in Thai literature named Sri Thanonchai, who was famous for the tricks he played on other people, including the king. He'd always get away with it because he was so clever. There was one time he was down in the river, and the king comes along with his retinue. He sees Sri Thanonchai down in the river and says, "I know you're clever, but there's no way you could get me to go down in the river with you." Sri Thanonchai thinks for a bit, "You know, you're right. But if you got down in the river, I could get you out." The king says, "Oh, yeah?" He goes down to the river. Then he says, "Okay, now try to get me out." And Sri Thanonchai says, "Well, I've already got you down into the river. Whether you get out or not, that's your business."

So watch out for your defilements that will lure you out of the seat and take the seat in your place. You stay here. Learn how to construct a good seat so that it's a good place to stay. The breath is comfortable. It fills the body with a sense of ease and harmony. And as you're busy constructing this good seat, you find that you don't have much time for other things. When they do a barge in, you can take

them apart. If you can't figure out how to take them apart quite yet, then just hold on to your seat. That way you can stay safe.