A Sense of Where You Are

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Noom Pal Puth was one of the forest Ajahns, one of the few who studied with Ajahn Sao, Ajahn Mun’s teacher. Once I heard him tell how Ajahn Sao would teach meditation step by step. He wouldn’t tell you much in advance. He wouldn’t tell you anything in advance. People would come to him and ask how to meditate, and he said, “Well, do this.” “Focus on the breath,” or, “Repeat puto.” If they asked any further questions, he said, “Well, just go ahead and do it first.” Then when they did it, and if it got results of any kind, they would come back and ask him. Then he’d tell them the next step, and then the next. That was it. In other words, he didn’t try to set up any anticipations. Aside from the fact that it would be worth doing this. You might have a general idea that this is how you would come to an end of suffering, how you’d train your mind, but that was it as to what you might see or experience along the way. He didn’t say anything at all. Ajahn Fuang had a similar approach. He said that his favorite people to study meditation were the jhanas. Chinese merchants in town who had never had enough time to read any dharma. They’d come to him, and he’d give a little bit more than a jhansa. He’d give the seven basic steps there in keeping the breath in mind. But that was it. The point of all this is that when you meditate, you’ve got to take things step by step. Right anticipation is not enough. It’s not a fact of the path. Often, knowing too much about what other people have experienced further along the path can get in the way, because you start trying to steer your meditation in that direction before it’s ready to go there. So when the meditation says, “Focus on your breath,” you focus on your breath. Spread the breath to different parts of the body. That’s what you do. Have a very clear sense of where the mind is. Ajahn Lee says there are different places where you can let your attention rest. After experimenting with a few of them, you’ll find which one seems most congenial. It really is where your mind really feels most centered, most at home, most right here. That’s your home base. You want to have a very strong sense of home base. You may have heard that the mind that gains awakening doesn’t have a sense of location, and you do your best to obliterate location. But that’s not how it’s done. First, you’ve got to get a very strong sense of location, and then figure out which is the best location to focus on, to maintain. Even though you may have your one basic home base, sometimes it’s wise to move around a little bit. But you always want to have a very strong sense of where you are. This is a lot of what mindfulness and alertness is all about, where you are in the body. For instance, when pain comes up, there are different ways of relating to it. One is to go right into the pain. But you need a certain attitude. You need certain skills before you’re really ready to do that and gain genuine insights. Otherwise, you rush in and then you get impatient. You try to gain some sort of insight, and you tend to push things in a certain direction. You can actually make the pain go away sometimes, but that doesn’t necessarily mean that you’ve really understood the pain. To understand it, you have to be willing to sit with it, to comprehend it, and that takes time. You have to be willing to observe it. And to be willing to observe it, you have to be able to put the mind in a position where it doesn’t feel threatened by the pain, and it’s not in a hurry to get everything over and done with. That’s why John Lee recommends that when there’s pain in the body, your first step is to go focus on another part of the body. Not that you’re running away from the pain, but you’re giving the mind a good solid foundation from which it can observe the pain. Or if you want to go into the pain, you know that if things get really bad, you have a safe place to go back to if you have to. So the first step is always, whenever there’s pain in the body, try to find a comfortable spot and establish yourself there. This may mean developing several different places in the body that you can go to. And have a very strong sense of where you are in the body, because that’s going to be one of the issues that’s going to be important when you start dealing with the pain. As you focus in on the pain, you might ask yourself, “Which side of the pain are you on? Are you on top of the pain? Are you below the pain?” And if you get a sense that you’re on top of the pain, ask yourself, “What would it be like to sense yourself as below the pain?” See how that changes it. What kind of pain is it? Is there a sense of pressure? Is there a sense of heat? Is there a sting? Which part of the pain is worse? Does the worst part always stay in the same place? Does it move around? What you want to get is a really direct, visceral sense of what the issue is here. This is something you can’t get from reading about it beforehand. Reading about it beforehand is useful in giving you questions to ask, but it can’t give you the actual experience. An important part of the actual experience is seeing what arises together with what when the pain and the pain intensifies. What actually happened in the mind just at that moment when the pain intensified? Because this is an important part of the Buddhist teachings on causality. It’s not that you create a cause now and wait for years or whatever for the results to come. Some of the results come immediately. That’s how you know there’s a connection. So you want to look for that. When the mind moves in a certain way, does it make the pain worse? Does it make it better? What kind of labels do you have? What do you have for the pain? One of those labels is about the location of the pain. Does the location stay the same, or does it seem to stay the same simply because you slapped a label on it and try to force it to stay there? Are you afraid to take the label off for fear that the pain will start moving around and inhabiting more of your body? That actually does happen when you take the label off. Just be there with this sensation, but don’t label it as pain. Or even if it feels like fire or pressure. What is this pressure? What is pressure? Pressure is usually the water element pressing against the earth element. Something’s pressing against something else. What if you took away the sense of there being something there to press against something else? What would happen then? Keep experimenting with the labels that you have for the pain and see if there are any moments when the mind is not labeling the pain at all. Where is the suffering then? The important thing is that you’re not anticipating a particular answer. You’re really exploring. You’re trying to find things out. You may have in the back of your mind a few ideas. Again, what you’ve learned from listening to Dharma talks or reading things. But the important quality is that you learn how to ask these questions right where you are and not try to anticipate things too much. Ajahn Maha Bua talks about how Ajahn Mun would teach. He’d like to give these long sermons that were basically maps of the path. He had many different students at many different levels of the path, and so he tended to survey the whole path through a Dharma talk. Ajahn Maha Bua began to notice that Ajahn Mun would get to a certain point in the path in the Dharma talk where it seemed like he’d set up a really interesting problem and suggested ways of answering it. But he wouldn’t tell you what the answer was. He’d move on to something else. And he always wondered about that, until later on he realized that the whole point of that was to give you some questions to ask, but not to clutter up your mind with perceptions or anticipations about what the answer might be. Because the whole point of the practice is that you find your answers yourself. You really have to look into the issue yourself. It’s only through your looking that you’re going to gain any real insights. So even though we practice with a sense of urgency and the importance of getting things cool or dead to practice, still there is a need for patience. These things take time. And it doesn’t help to jump ahead of where you are. You’ve got to have a sense of not only where you are physically right now, but where you are in your abilities to analyze things. And the only way you’re going to know that is to sit down and get a good sense of being right here and then start analyzing things. If you find that the questions you ask are not getting any clear answers, and they seem confusing, just drop that whole question and go back to being very still. Have some respect for your concentration, because that’s what you really need to gain the insights. It’s like the old story about the goose that laid the golden egg. The insights are the eggs, but concentration is the goose that provides the eggs. Sometimes you get so intent on the eggs that you forget to feed the goose. I think in the story they actually kill the goose to get the eggs. Of course, that’s the end of the eggs. What’s concentration about? It’s about having a strong sense of being right here, located in the body, inhabiting the body. We’re developing a state of becoming, which is central to the path. Even though the Buddha talks about going beyond becoming, you’ve got to establish this state of becoming really well. It means having a sense of location at a particular spot. You take on the identity that comes with being one with your object, and that’s the foundation from which you’re going to gain your insight, even though the insight someday will come back. And dismantle the concentration. Don’t dismantle it before it’s done its work. Keep feeding the goose, and the insights will come.

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