Generating Peace

March 10, 2023

In Thailand, the Ajahns will often say to begin your meditation by making a survey of the body and a survey of the mind. A survey of the body. Start with your fingers and toes. Move on up. If you feel any tension or tightness in the joints, in the muscles, see if you can relax it. Get your posture just right, not leaning in any direction, not curled over. Let each organ have its space. And survey your mind. Are there any issues left over from the day? See if you can clear them out, too. It’s like you’re sweeping out the place before you’re going to settle down. One of the reasons we have the chant for goodwill is to put you in the right frame of mind, so that no matter what anybody has done, either to you personally or what you’ve read about in the world outside, you’ll have lots of goodwill, remembering that you can’t wait to straighten out the whole world before you straighten out your mind. Because that’s what everybody else is doing all the time, trying to straighten out the world with minds that are not straightened out. And no wonder the world is crooked. It would be a lot better off if everybody turned around and looked inside, got rid of their own greed, aversion, and delusion, and then saw what they have to offer the world. So in the midst of this imperfect world, you’re going to try to find some peace in the midst of this world that is very unpeaceful. You want to do your part by generating some peace inside. How do you generate peace? You make a firm determination that you’re going to stay with one thing, the breath. And you’re going to try to make the breath as attractive and as interesting as you can, so that the mind is not feeling forced to be here, but it feels peacefully glad to be here. Remind yourself that you have no other responsibilities impinging on you right now. So you’re free to examine your own body, examine your own mind, examine your own breath. That should be a source of joy right there, that you have this opportunity. Meditation instructions would always say, “Have an attitude of confidence and an attitude of conviction that you’re doing important work here.” How does peace come into the world? It comes out of a peaceful mind. So you’re doing your part. When the breath starts getting comfortable, then you can allow it to spread. Sometimes you’ll find that you can spread it throughout the entire body with no problems. Other times it seems like parts of the body are missing or parts of the body are blacked. And no matter how much you think about the breath going through them, nothing seems to go through. Well, something must be penetrating. It may not be much. After all, if nothing were penetrating at all, you’d be paralyzed. What are the parts of the body that you can’t make comfortable the way you’d like to? Well, just go around them. As John Lee says, “Find any one tree that you look at at any one time.” It’s not the case that all the leaves are young and green. You have some old leaves, some yellow leaves. Some of the branches are healthy, some of them are not. That’s the normal way of trees. And it’s the normal way of the body, too. It’s an interesting exercise to see how much you can create a sense of well-being through the body. The Buddha encourages that. But you find that you run up against obstacles sometimes. Work around them. And as I said, remind yourself that even in the places that seem blocked, they’re not totally blocked. It’s like one of those traffic jams on the road that the cars crawl along. And eventually something will get through, but it’ll take time. You can’t go ram-riding through and destroy a lot of cars. There are just too many of them. Your car gets destroyed. So think of whatever openings there may be and allow them to be there. You focus on the areas that are responsive to your attention. The kind of attention you want to bring is centered but open. In other words, instead of clamping down on one center in the body, the spot where you’re centered should seem like a light that’s radiating out from that center. And it’s going to have this balance of full body awareness plus a center. It’s like having work for both of your hands. If both hands are busy and you don’t have any empty hand to pick up things that you shouldn’t be picking up, I knew an old teacher one time in Thailand who came to meditation when she was old, retired. And her trick was to focus on two points in the body at once. For her, it’s the middle of the head and the base of the spine. And to think of a wire connecting them down the spine. And the fact that she had to keep track of two things at once meant that she had no room for thinking about anything else. And then from those two spots her awareness spread to fill the whole body. So you can try that. In other words, you want to give the mind work to do. We do want the mind to rest. But if you’re just to rest, you’re going to fall asleep. So you want to find something restful but active. And so one of the things you can do is actively be aware of the body and think of the breath energy spreading out and try to expand your awareness so it fills the whole body. And just keep on doing that, doing that, doing that. That gets you past that phase in the meditation that often happens when the mind begins to settle down, but it’s not totally solid with its object, and it begins to drift. Because you’ve left the breath and you’ve started wallowing around in the breath. And the focus begins to dissolve, your mindfulness begins to get weak, your alertness gets weak. You know that you’re still, but not much else. So to avoid that trap, give the mind work to do. You can think of the bones in the body. If you want to visualize something, the mind has this tendency to visualize, and some people tend to be more visual than others. You can imagine all the bones in the body and go through the body one by one by one, each bone, each bone. And if you sense any tension or tightness around that bone, allow it to relax. And do this for the whole body. So concentration work is work. It’s balanced work. And it’s work right here. You don’t have to go traveling off someplace else. And because it is focused on one thing, it does give the mind some rest. It gives it a sense of well-being. As the Buddha said, “There is no happiness aside from peace.” Now you may argue with that. You can think of lots of different pleasures and forms of happiness. But even in those cases, there’s a sense of well-being that comes when you can just stay with one particular idea, stay with one particular activity, and you get pushed off. And it does happen that you get pushed off pretty quickly, like a scruffy person standing in front of a jewelry store, looking at the jewelry in the window. There’ll come a point where the owners of the store get concerned, and they’ll push you off. They’ve got somebody to drive you away. But here with the breath, there’s nobody to drive you away. As long as you’re alive, there’ll be breath coming in and going out. And it’s not the sort of meditation object, say, like a visual meditation, or a meditation where you have to keep creating something. The breath is there. You’re simply giving it space, allowing it to fill the whole body. That’s enough work to keep you here, to keep you alert, but at the same time to provide a sense of solidity, well-being. And even in the midst of this whole-body awareness, you can develop a sense of being really centered. This is why it’s called concentration. You have concentric circles. The whole body is the outside circle, but there are other circles inside, and they finally converge on one point. That’s the quality of awareness that you’re trying to develop. Then you maintain it. There’s a voice in the mind that always says, “What’s next? What’s next?” For the sake of the concentration, you have to keep on saying, “This is what’s next.” You may have read about moving on from concentration to insight, but one of the ways you’re going to gain insight is not to listen to that voice that’s pushing you off. You have to recognize that that’s a disturbance. This is one of the ways in which doing concentration develops insight in and of itself. Once you set up the intention to be here, other intentions will come in, and your ability to say no to them effectively is going to develop your insight. Remember one of the Buddhist definitions of discernment? It’s not just seeing things as they are. It’s learning to control the mind so that when you see something that you know is going to give long-term harm but you like doing it, you can talk yourself out of doing it. Or something that gives long-term well-being but you don’t like doing it or you feel lazy, you can talk yourself into wanting to do it. There’s a strategic element there, and it’s in line with the Buddha’s original question for how you begin to develop discernment. “What, when I do it, will lead to long-term welfare and happiness? What, when I do it, will lead to long-term harm and suffering?” Insight is not just seeing things as they are, but seeing the mind as it functions and learning to get it to function the way that you want. So learning to put long-term results ahead of your immediate likes and dislikes, that’s an important part of insight and discernment right there. Right now, this means getting the mind as concentrated as you can, as still as you can, with a sense of full body awareness. But centered, solid. As you keep tending to this, looking after the state of mind, issues of discernment will come up, whether or not you’re helping to intend to do vipassana practice or intend to do insight. But the insights come because you’re doing something good and trying to maintain that goodness. You’re trying to develop that goodness. It’s all part of right effort. The Buddha gently talks about the qualities that you bring to mindfulness practice. Mindfulness, ardency, alertness. Ardency, i.e., right effort, for him is the wisdom factor of those three. This is very different from the commentaries. The commentaries don’t even define alertness as alertness. It’s funny, in the canon it’s very obviously a question of knowing what you’re doing while you’re doing it. But the commentary gets actually snide about that, because everybody knows what they’re doing while they’re doing it. Even babies sucking at their mother’s breast, even jackals barking away, they know what they’re doing while they’re doing it. Which is not the case. So they come up with a new definition for the word, which has been translated into English as “clear comprehension.” I see things in terms of three perceptions and three characteristics. That’s very little to what the Buddha says about mindfulness practice for him. Even the Buddha himself says that the insight lies in seeing what you’re doing, knowing what you should be doing, and being able to do it regardless of your likes. That’s wisdom. So as you maintain this state of mind, you’re a wise activity, and you will gain insights as you work at it. And they’re the kind of insights that are your insights, and they mature, they grow, and they’re directly related to your increasing level of sensitivity. That’s where the real insight is. You see something that you’ve been doing, and then you suddenly see the connection between what you’re doing and the stress that it’s causing, and you realize that you don’t have to do that, and you let it go. And whether you’re, say, in constant stressful or not-self or not, the fact that you can let go, that’s the important part of the discernment. So look after this state of mind. Tend to it. Then you realize that you’re carrying through with those initial instructions. Make a service. Survey the body. Make a survey of the mind. But keep on doing that to make sure everything is in order. And then maintain that. That’s how the practice progresses.

<https://www.dhammatalks.org/Archive/y2023/230310_Generating_Peace.mp3>