

A Pervasive Well-being

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When we talk about practicing concentration, we often talk about bringing the mind to oneness, or a state of one-pointedness or singleness. It's important that we understand what this means and how you do it because there are two ways of explaining the Pali term *ekaggatā*. One is that the mind is at one point. *Eka* means one, *agga* means point or tip, but the question is, are you just aware of one point or is there just a focal point around which all the rest of your awareness develops? The way you answer this question determines the way you're going to be practicing.

Ajaan Lee often recommends that when you start out meditating, try to find one point and just really keep track of that one point. Don't pay attention to anything else. If you're going to focus on the tip of the nose, stay right at the tip of the nose. If you're going to focus on the middle of the head, stay right at the middle of the head. He has the image of sitting at the gate to a cattle pen, watching the cattle as they come in, as they go out: Don't go getting involved with the cattle in the pen, he says, or they might trample you. That's the first step. Another image he has is of a post at the edge of the sea: The sea rises and the sea falls, but the post doesn't rise or fall along with the sea.

In other words, you don't have to follow the breath into the body. Now, this doesn't mean that you're not aware of the rest of the body, simply that you're not paying attention to it. You let it be in the background. But that kind of one-pointedness is not all that stable. It's very easy for it to get snuffed out. So the next step he recommends is going through the body, one section at a time.

In other words, you move your one point around but you begin to expand its range. Focus on the abdomen, or focus at the base of the neck, and then think of the breath going in various parts of the body in relationship to that. If you're focused on the back of the neck, think of the breath energy going down the spine. This broadens your range of awareness. If you start at the navel, be aware of that area for a while, then move over to the right, over to the left, then up to the solar plexus; right flank, left flank, then to the middle of the chest and up into the head. Start getting a sense of how the breath energy flows throughout the body.

The purpose of all this is to give you a more solid foundation, one, and also to give you a real frame of reference when the breath gets more and more subtle, so subtle that gets really

difficult to follow. If your range of awareness is too small, you lose track of the breath. If your range of awareness is larger, you don't.

Sometimes, you have the experience of hitting an air pocket in your meditation. Things get more and more refined, more and more refined, and suddenly, whoops, you drop out of sight for a second and come right back. That's because the breath got so refined that you couldn't follow it, and your range of awareness was too small. All you had was that one spot, so it's not stable.

You've got to expand your range of awareness. As you work through all the various blockages in the body, you find that the body becomes a more comfortable place to stay. It's easier to settle down right here. When you've gone through the body as a whole several times and have opened up the roadblocks, there finally comes a point where you can just settle down. You don't have to move around anymore, and again you return to the theme of the one-pointedness, or the one summit, the one tip of the mind, but at this stage, it's not that you just stay right there. From that point, you let your awareness spread out to fill the whole body. There's one point where your focus is strongest, but the rest of the body is in your range. Your awareness covers the whole body.

When they talk about concentration or jhana, they call it *mahaggatam cittam*: the enlarged or expanded mind. Not only is it one, but it's also enlarged, and that's the most solid state of awareness you can develop, when there is a definite point where your awareness is focused but the range of your awareness covers the whole body. This type of awareness is so solid that even if the breath stops, you're not lost. Even if you lose sense of the body, in other words, the shape of the body begins to get kind of fuzzy, you're not lost.

Ajaan Lee makes an analogy to drops of mist. The body is just a mist of little sensations. There is kind of a presence here, but it begins to get more and more amorphous. If your range of awareness is broad, it's not knocked off by that, doesn't lose its frame of reference, because the awareness at this point begins to take itself more and more as its own object. Its sense of being centered and yet broad begins to overwhelm the object, and you're more and more aware of the awareness, the quality of the awareness, the centeredness and breadth of the awareness, and you can take that as your object for a long period of time. The mind feels at ease when it's there, feels strengthened, energized, because it's not confined. It's not carrying much of anything around. It's just carrying its own efforts to keep it there. That's all it's really carrying at that point.

So when we talk about singleness in the course of the meditation, it's not that you're trying

to block out everything but the one point. It's there, you realize it's there. It's not that you block out the rest of awareness. It's just that, at the beginning, you don't focus on the rest of your awareness. You don't pay attention to anything else but the one point. Then you move around and clear up the blockages in the body as a way of giving yourself a foundation, so that you can return eventually to that one-pointedness in a really solid way, and the concentration will last a lot longer.

Otherwise, you find that there's a problem here in the body that distracts you, a problem there in the body that distracts you, a pain here, a blockage there, and you can't really settle down properly.

It's like a dog lying down. It lies down, whoops, there's a rock, so it gets up and it scratches the rock away, then it lies down again. Oh, there's a root, so it scratches away at this and that, until finally it gets a place where it can lie down comfortably. It's an image you can never use in Thailand, because no one wants to be compared to a dog, but that's what the mind does.

Or it's like lying down on a bed, as in the famous story of the princess and the pea. You lie there, whoops, there's a bump in the bed, so you get up, and you smooth it out, remove the pea, and then you can lie down more comfortably. That's how you develop this state of being not only at oneness but also enlarged. That's the kind of concentration that can form a basis for insight because nothing is blocked out at that stage in the practice. The mind is allowed to be as large as it wants to be, but it's centered. It's got a basis. It's not wandering around here. It's more radiant.

You may not actually sense light—some people do—but even without the light, there is a sense of radiance, a sense of brightness in the feeling tone of the way you experience the body, the way you experience your awareness, and this forms the central factor of the path. Once the mind is in this state of awareness and supported by all the other elements in the path—right view, right resolve, right action, right speech, right effort, right mindfulness—it can do amazing things to your understanding of yourself, your understanding of the way the mind acts, the way it creates suffering for itself, the way it doesn't have to create suffering for itself.

You relate to your own awareness in a different way. There's no sense that you're a stranger to yourself anymore, because the sense of awareness really does feel healthy, strong, with a pervasive sense of well-being. This is what we're working at as we work at concentration.

It's good work. It's work in creating health for the mind, creating healthy circumstances for the mind, strengthening the mind. So whatever the effort that gets put into training or restraining the mind that doesn't want to settle into concentration—however difficult it may

be: Once the mind finally gets there and has a taste of the well-being that comes from being centered, the effort's more than repaid, and you realize that you've developed a really important skill.