

Relationships

May, 2003

Meditation, concentration practice, gives us a chance to put down our burdens and responsibilities. Even if we can't let go of them for good, at least it gives us a chance to rest. You focus on your breath and that's your only responsibility. Be with the breath. The breath is already happening. There's nothing much you have to do. You don't have to breathe the body. The body will breathe on its own. All you have to do is tend it, nudge it a little bit in the right direction, so that the breath feels good coming in, feels good going out. You're not building up tension as you breathe in; you're not holding on to tension as you breathe out.

Basically, it's a very simple task. It may not be easy but it's simple. The reason it's not easy is that we tend to complicate things. We have a multi-tasking mind all the time, and it doesn't know what to do with itself when there's only one task at hand. But if you focus your attention more and more on the breath this way, you find that your awareness gets more absorbed into the body here in the present moment. And the mind that used to fill itself up with multi-tasking can now fill itself up with the sensation of the body, breathing in, breathing out—the whole body breathing in, the whole body breathing out, with a sense of ease throughout the nervous system.

As for any other thoughts that may come by, just let them go past. You don't have to get involved with them. You don't have to straighten them out. You don't have to remember them no matter how wonderful or fantastic or useful they may seem. At the moment, they're of no use. Just let them go. Let them go. Let them go. And this way, at least for the time being, you free the mind from a lot of its burdens. A lot of the issues and responsibilities that it tends to carry around.

To make a comparison with a person, it's like someone who's been carrying loads of rice sacks. In Thailand, they still have workers who unload ships by putting huge sacks on their backs. When you see them walking around away from work, they tend to be bent over because that's the way they spent their lives—bent over carrying those rice sacks. Here though, you can stand tall. Stand up straight—not having to carry those burdens around.

The purpose of this is to give you a sense of ease that comes from within, a sense of well-being that comes from within. Because for so much of our lives we tend to feed on things outside for the sake of our well-being, for the sake of the sense of feeling secure, feeling fulfilled, feeling happy. We think we need to feed on things outside and as a result we find ourselves feeding on all kinds of things that are bad for us, latching on to things that are bad for us, feeling that we have to depend on them. The purpose of the meditation is to give a sense of independence to the mind so that its happiness doesn't have to depend on things outside. It'll be something totally inward. The beauty of this is that once you lean less on things outside, you

find that your relationship to things outside goes a lot better. In other words, your happiness doesn't have to depend on a relationship, doesn't have to depend on a certain state of the economy, doesn't even have to depend on the health of the body. It becomes more and more an inward issue. And when you're not leaning on your relationships, you're not leaning on things outside, you're putting less weight on them as well.

The Buddha talks a lot about clinging. And when we hear those teachings, we immediately translate them into attachment. We start thinking about our attachments to other people, our attachments to certain way of doing things, certain living situations we have. It's important that we take those notions apart. Because when we hear the Buddha says to be unattached, it sounds like we're being told to be cold-hearted or irresponsible.

But that's not what he's saying at all. He's telling us not to be addicted to things outside and not to lean on things to the extent that we think that our happiness needs to depend on them. Because as we lean on them, we justify it by telling ourselves that it's noble to have commitments to other people. Well, it is, but then there's the element of our leaning on those commitments that the Buddha points out is unhealthy, both for ourselves and for the relationship.

So it's important that we be clear on what he's talking about. He's not telling us not to have special relationships and not to be committed to other people. He's not telling us to be cold-hearted and indifferent. What he *is* telling us is to find a resource within ourselves so that our happiness can be independent. That way, when we're dealing with relationships, dealing with other people, we're coming from a position of strength and there are no hidden agendas where we're hoping to lean on them in a particular situation.

Look at the way the Buddha designed the Vinaya. When a monk ordains, he's supposed to treat his preceptor as a father. The preceptor is supposed to treat the young monk as a son. And they're supposed to hold to this relationship as long as they're both alive, with the same sense of commitment that a father and son would have to each other—especially back in those days where they didn't have Social Security, didn't have any other way for old people to get around aside from depending on their children. So there's a strong sense of commitment there. The Buddha's not saying that commitment is bad. It's a good thing. But part of the training is for them to learn to have their individual happiness independent of each other. That way, the happiness doesn't depend on the other's being a particular way.

And this is a skill we learn as we meditate: to have a place where our happiness comes from within. As the Buddha says, when you focus on the breath, there comes a point where the mind really is secluded from other things. It's let other things go. It can simply be there with the breath coming in, going out. No need to push it or pull it. No need to distort things. Just allow things to settle down in their own natural place. And there comes a sense of fullness. Allow that sense of fullness to fill the body. As it fills the body, you find that the mind feels a lot less

frazzled. At the same time, the qualities it needs to develop to maintain this, in terms of mindfulness and alertness, give nourishment to the mind.

So you're putting yourself in a position of strength. When you're in this position, then when you're dealing with relationships with people around you, you see exactly what is appropriate and what's not. What's needed and what's not.

For example, there are the four sublime attitudes that we chanted just now. They end in equanimity. And everyone assumes, well, that's where Buddhism is heading—toward total indifference. But the Buddha teaches the set of all four. And the question is learning to have the right attitude at the right time, for the right situation.

In other words, the basic attitude you start with is one of goodwill: "May I be happy. May all living beings be happy." This is not just an idle thought. It's the motivation that underlies the Buddha's teachings as a whole. There's a reason he taught the four noble truths, saying that this is the best use of your powers of concentration: to learn to focus in on the issue of suffering that you create through your own craving and how you can put an end to it. This teaching is based on a wish for well-being: the desire not to create suffering.

So that's your basic attitude. Built on that, there's compassion for people who are suffering. Sympathetic joy for people who are happy. In other words, you don't resent their happiness. You're not jealous of their happiness or their good fortune. Compassion for people who are suffering means not only feeling for them, but also, if you're in a position to help, you help. But there also come times when you can't help. You can't change the situation. People are the way they are. And you realize it's an issue of karma.

Notice that when we have the chant for equanimity, it's different from the other three. The first three are "may, may, may": "May all beings be happy. May all beings who are suffering be free from their suffering. May those who are happy not be deprived of their happiness." They all start with "May this happen, may that happen." But the chant for equanimity starts out, "All living beings are the owners of their actions." It's a declarative statement. It's the way things are. Situations are often such that there's only so much you can do. Beyond that, it's just spinning your wheels, beating your head against a wall. And that's when you have to develop equanimity, so that you can focus your energies in areas where you really can make a difference.

So equanimity is not a matter of indifference or cold-heartedness. It's more a matter of having priorities and getting those priorities to be realistic—appropriate for the situation. And the ability to see what's appropriate is best developed through concentration practice, through mindfulness practice, like we're doing right now. Being mindful of the breath. Keeping the mind centered. Keeping it well based.

Ajaan Lee often uses the analogy of a person in concentration as being like someone who's standing straight. When you're standing straight, things are not skewed. Most people are leaning in one direction or another, through attachment to this, a dislike for that, clinging to this, clinging to that. They're leaning over here, leaning over there. And, of course, when you're

leaning, you don't see things straight. The concentration allows you to stand up straight so that you can see things straight up and down for what they are.

At the same time, it gives you a sense of balance and stability. Your happiness depends on being right here, right now. In other words, your basis is right under your center of gravity. And from that position, you can act in ways that are also appropriate. You not only see things for what they are, but also act in the appropriate way. With an appropriate attitude. You fulfill your responsibilities, your commitments. You help where you can.

But you also have a very strong, clear sense of where you can't help and where nothing can be done and you leave it alone, because the mind isn't leaning in a particular direction where it has to see things in a distorted way in order to maintain that distorted position. The mind is well-placed. It can see things for what they are and it doesn't feel like it's lost anything. It's got all the support it needs inside so it's not looking for other people, other situations to provide that support.

This is what it means not to cling. But it also means we're operating from a position of strength and our help for other people can be freely given.

So again, when we talk about non-attachment, it's not that we're being taught to be cold-hearted, indifferent, or irresponsible. We honor our commitments. We honor our basic goodwill for other people—their wish for happiness. It's simply that we're not feeding off of those things secretly. We've got better sources of food inside.

So the skill of concentration—this ability to let things go for the time being and learn how to stand straight, without having to hold on to this or hold on to that—is one of the most important skills you can develop. So even though it may seem like a strange exercise, focusing on the breath, relaxing the patterns of tension here, relaxing them there, still, as you work at it, it goes deeper and deeper, and seeps deeper and deeper into the mind until it has more and more of a profound effect on the whole way you relate to yourself. The way you relate to your happiness. The way you relate to the people around you. That's because it takes our mind, which is listing to one direction or another, and brings it back on an even keel. And many times we don't even realize we've been listing until we're straight up and down. Then we realize how much better it is for us and the people around us that we have our mind that well established, because when it's established that way, you can do things in a much more skillful way.

I once visited a pottery center in Thailand and I watched one of the men making a pot on a wheel. His powers of concentration seemed really strong as he was working on it, and I mentioned that fact to him. And he said, "Yes, your mind has to be straight up and down all the way, all the time you've got your hand touching the pot. Otherwise, it gets pushed off to the left, pushed off to the right, and the whole thing gets ruined."

So as we develop this ability to keep our mind straight up and down in the body, the results—the skills with which we lead our lives—get improved. Our craftsmanship becomes more

and more refined. And the result is that we have a much more secure happiness, and the people around us don't have us leaning on them all the time. That way, our help for one another can be freely given.

So it's better both within and without that we develop this skill and try to master it.