

Ekaggata

April 22, 2005

Alertness—the Pali word is *sampajañña*—has a special meaning when you're meditating. It means, specifically, being alert to what you're doing. And for a lot of people that's something very difficult. They focus on things outside, what other people are doing, and any reaction seems to just come up on its own from within. They don't usually ask questions about how much they're playing a role in all this. As a result, they end up causing themselves a lot of suffering—and a lot of suffering for people around them as well. So a basic part of the training in terms of generosity, virtue, meditation, is becoming more sensitive to your own actions.

It's interesting to note that when the Buddha starts out talking about the principle of action, he does it in the context of two particular types of action: gratitude and generosity. Because what does gratitude mean, if not realizing that the people who have helped you made choices? It was their choice to help, their choice to do the right thing. And you value that. If you value that in other people, it means you're more likely to start valuing it in yourself as well. This is why gratitude is such a huge theme in the Buddha's teachings.

Then there's generosity. And the teaching on generosity is not that you just give up, give up, give up, or give away, give away, give away. It means that there's always a trade. You always get something in return. And the better the gift, the better the return. The purpose of this understanding is that it trains you to be more likely to give of yourself, to put out the effort. And the Buddha wants you to be more sensitive to just that: the ways in which you're generous, and the things you get back from your generosity. When you begin to see the connection, that's when you start understanding the principle of action, and your alertness is going to get stronger.

Then he moves on to the precepts. You have to be alert to what you're doing if you're going to stick with the precepts. You can't just make a promise to yourself and then trust that it's going to happen on its own without your paying any attention to what you're doing. You promise yourself that you're not going to kill anything. Okay, watch yourself. No stealing, no illicit sex, no lying, no intoxicants: In every case, watch yourself.

The precept on lying is particularly subtle, because there are so many little ways that we misrepresent the truth. So you've got to be especially careful there. And as you watch over your speech, you begin to see that when you're very careful about what you say, what you say becomes more worth listening to. People will start

listening to it more. And you begin to see the effect of the energy you put into the system, how it comes back.

This makes you more sensitive to the speech inside the mind. After all, the Buddha said that when we talk it comes from two mental activities: directed thought and evaluation. These are precisely the things we're working on as we meditate. You focus your thoughts on something, and then you observe it, you evaluate it. This is how alertness moves inside the mind. When you think of the breath in a particular way, when you focus on it in a particular way, what happens? Look carefully at this. The more time you spend looking at this, the more you begin to realize that some aspects of the breath can be affected by your present intention, while there are some things you can't change. That's something we can learn only through practice, coming back again, and again, and again to the breath. But it's important, because the more sensitive you are to how you do things, the better the results are going to be.

Ajaan Fuang once mentioned to me that when he was teaching meditation, people would often come up with weird things happening in their meditation: strange sensations in their bodies, difficulties that, he said, he himself had never encountered. But he found that those seven steps at the beginning of Method Two in Ajaan Lee's *Keeping the Breath in Mind* were a good guide to how to deal with anything that comes up in concentration practice. So it's useful to go back and look at them every now and then, to measure your meditation against those seven steps to see if something is lacking. Two of the important principles there are, one, getting a sense of the whole body. And Ajaan Lee has you work toward that by going through the body section by section, so that the whole body becomes connected breath sensations.

That's the direction you want to work in. Because otherwise, when the breath gets very subtle, and your concentration is beginning to settle in but hasn't really settled down, the breath can seem to disappear, or you lose track of it. Or, because the mind isn't constantly monitoring what's going on, it begins to get blurry. All kinds of random thoughts come in, the synapses start firing in your mind, weird things come up, and you can easily get distracted. So there are two paradoxical ways of dealing with this. One is to broaden your sense of awareness, so that even when the breath gets very subtle, you've got a sense of the whole body to stay focused on. This is your frame of reference. You want to keep it large. It has a tendency to shrink, so you have to keep reminding yourself: "whole body" as you breathe in, "whole body" as you breathe out.

But that, too, can get blurry, so you have to balance it with a sharp focus. Ajaan Lee lists seven spots, what he calls "resting spots" for the breath in the body.

They're like nodes. Some them correspond with the chakras, which seem to be connected to what are called "breath channels." And you can sense them. You can focus in on one of them, and the breath seems to spread from the spot where you're focused to fill out other areas of the body as well. You're in touch with one spot, but it helps connect you all over the body. The point just above the navel, the tip of the sternum, the base of the throat, the palate, the middle of the head, the top of the head: Choose any one of these spots that you find congenial and settle in. And to be very careful to keep observing that spot.

Another way of developing this quality of being clearly focused is to go through the whole body in a lot of detail. Again, this is another way of dealing with that middle zone, as the mind is beginning to settle down. Go through the whole body taking a very precise survey—the tip of each finger, then the next joint of each finger, and then the next joint, and then up to the palm of the hand, the back of the hand, the wrist, the forearm—trying to be very, very precise. And then, once you've been through the body a couple of times, you can settle down. Choose one spot, make that your home base, and then from there think of the sense of awareness spreading out to fill the whole body.

So, you have both a broad range and a sharp focus. When you can keep the two of these balanced, the mind will really settle down. It's like you've tied all of its hands, all of its feet, so it can't grab this or grab that. You're right here in the present moment, both with that sharp focus and that broad sense of awareness. In this way, you get both meanings of the word *ekaggata*: "one-pointedness" and "singleness as a whole." When you can get both of those qualities together, you can get past that middle range and settle into fixed penetration.

This is how you ride herd on your mind as you're trying to get it to settle down, so that it develops a sense of expansiveness, which is one of the really enjoyable parts of right concentration. And it also has a clarity of a very sharp focus. You're going to need both if you want your concentration to form a good foundation for insight. And getting the balance is an important first step in using your insight, using your alertness, to make your concentration just right.