

The Constancy of the Body

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The mind's a very inconstant thing: repeatedly jumping around, changing its mind; thinking this way then thinking that way; making up its mind to do something then dropping it and running off with something else.

If it were a friend, you probably would have given up on that friend a long time ago. But here you are, stuck with it. So you need to train the mind to be more like a friend, a true friend. And as Ajaan Lee points out in one of his Dhamma talks, you've got a good friend right here with the body. Oh, it causes problems: aches here and there, hunger, whatever. But there's a certain constancy to the body. The feelings of solidity, warmth, a sense of energy that make up our sense of the body: Those are always there as long as we're alive. So try to learn from this friend. Even when you run away from the breath, the breath is still there, you can always come back to it. Then you find that you can stick with it, and it sticks with you. It teaches a lesson in constancy.

There's a passage in the texts where the Buddha is teaching Rahula, his son. He says, "Meditate making the mind like earth... make the mind like water... make the mind like fire... make the mind like wind," in the sense that none of these things are disturbed by beautiful things or ugly things, clean things or disgusting things. You can throw garbage down on the earth, but the earth doesn't shrink away; you throw perfumed water on the earth, and that doesn't have an effect either. This is a large part of their constancy: They're imperturbable.

And that's a quality you want to develop in the mind. If you look deep into the mind, you find that there is a quality of just knowingness—that it doesn't matter what happens, there's a knowing. Things can come falling down all around you and there's still that knowing. Our problem is that we identify with all the things that can fall down—that can be shaken, perturbed. And so in the meditation we're trying to find our way to that spot of unperturbed knowing. Even though it may not be the deathless, it's a good place to be: good, strong equanimity; a good, solid foundation inside.

And we're taught our lesson about that property of knowingness by looking at the properties in the body. You've got the earth, water, fire, the energy of the breath. These are basic properties that let you know that you've got a body here. And they're always there. Sometimes one may be more predominant than the others, but they're always there all the time. So when you see that the breath is constant—even when it's still, there's an element of still energy that counts as breath as well—when you see that the breath is constant, try to make your mind as constant as the breath. Pick up some habits from it.

When things go well, look at the properties in the body: They don't change. When things go poorly, look at the properties in the body—and they're the same. Try to make your mind that solid, that constant, that dependable.

One of our biggest problems in life is that we want something we can depend on and yet *we're* probably the most undependable feature in our lives: our mind and all of its sudden turns, sudden changes. So we're trying to take this most unreliable part of ourselves and apprentice it to some parts that are a little bit more reliable, more solid, more constant, so that it will pick up their habits.

It may seem like we're running against the Buddha's teachings. After all, he emphasizes that we should see things as inconstant and stressful and not-self, and here it seems like we're focusing on making the mind constant so it has a sense of ease and that it's under our control. And that's true. But only when you develop the mind in this direction will you begin to see the really subtle things that the Buddha was teaching when he was talking about the three characteristics. You can't see what's inconstant unless you make yourself really, really constant. Otherwise everything seems to be moving—like everything in the countryside when you look out the window of a moving train—and you have no idea what's moving and what's not. You can't detect subtle stress unless you have a very strong sense of ease. And you really can't know the not-selfness of things unless you try your best to bring them under your control. That's when you find the extent to which you can control things and where exactly you can't.

In other words, you have to fight against the three characteristics if you're really going to see them clearly.

But you don't have to think of it as a fight right now. Think of it as learning from your friends, or of apprenticing yourself to the breath. What does the breath have to teach you? It always comes in, always comes out. Whether you pay attention to it or not, that's what it's doing. It's not looking for your approval. It's just doing what it does, with a certain constancy.

So at the very least, try to make your mind as constant as the breath. Stick with it all the way in, all the way out. And then all the way in the next time, all the way out the next time. Don't let there be any gaps. Because it's in the constancy, the consistency, that, one, you develop the qualities you really need in the mind, and two, you begin to see things you didn't see before. The things that used to happen when you blinked—now there's no blinking, so you can see them.

It's when the mind can learn to rely on itself in this way that what it sees is really worth seeing and taking to heart.