

Hunker Down

January 14, 2006

When there's a Dhamma talk during the meditation, you don't have to listen to the Dhamma talk. In fact, it's best to focus 99.44% of your attention on the breath. Leave just a little bit for the talk. If something is relevant to your situation, relevant to your meditation, it'll come right in, without your having to send your mind out to focus on the talk. As for anything that's not relevant to your meditation, just let it go. Don't let the talk be a disturbance; don't let it be a distraction.

The whole point of the talk is to keep directing your attention back to the mind, back to the breath. It acts like a fence. When the mind starts wandering away from the breath, it runs into the fence, which directs you back. After all, that's where the Dhamma appears: right back at the mind, right back at the breath. The talk is just shadows, words, names for the Dhamma. The actual Dhamma is there in the mind. There might be *kusala dhamma* or *akusala dhamma*, in other words, skillful or unskillful qualities in the mind, but the Dhamma's right there in the mind, good or bad: That's what you've got.

As a meditator, your task is to sort out which mental events are skillful and which ones are not, who are your friends inside, who are not your friends. Focus on your friends, make the most of them, hang out with them as much as you can. You can look at this in terms of events in the mind and also in terms of what's going on in the body. As Ajaan Lee once said, the pains and the disturbances inside the body are like hoodlums, thieves, fools. Why do you hang around with them? Choose the parts the body that feel good—places where the breath energy feels good coming in, feels good going out. Hang out with them as much as you can. Just as with the world outside, you can't wait until all the fools are wiped out before you can enjoy your wise friends. You have to pick your wise friends and associate with them as much as you can. Just remember not to go to feeding the fools, allowing them inroads into your mind.

Another image from Ajaan Lee is a house where some of the floorboards are good and some are not good. If you're going to lie down on the floor, choose a spot where the floorboards are sound. Don't go lying down on a rotten spot. Or with food: Say you've got a mango with a wormy section in it. You don't eat the worms, you don't eat the wormy section, you eat just the good section. You can't

wait until everything is all good in the body before you can settle down. You've got to choose which parts are good and focus on those.

The same goes with the mind. You can't wait for the mind to have everything peaceful and good and well behaved before you settle down. Sometimes you've got to learn how to settle down in the midst of a turmoil. That's when you need the meditation most.

So you've got to learn through practice which of your thoughts are actually helpful, which ones are not, which thoughts you can deal with directly, which ones you simply have to sidestep. This is an important principle because all kinds of stuff can come up in the mind. After all, we all have past kamma, good and bad, and a lot of the thoughts that appear in the mind come from our past actions, our past intentions. That doesn't mean you're responsible for them right now. What you're responsible for right now is how you handle the situation. And as any good warrior knows, you don't fight every battle. If there's the possibility of winning out, okay, you put up a fight. If there isn't, step aside. You don't fight that battle. You can't waste your energy on things you can't overcome. You just do your best to avoid them for the time being. Otherwise, the things that you might try to overcome could end up overcoming you.

So when things are a real turmoil in the mind, just hang out in the body, hang out with the breath. Find which part of the breath in the body feels good and just stay there.

It's like a big storm coming in.

A couple of years back—it was right around this time of the year—we had a big three-day Santa Anna storm, and one night from midnight to 6 a.m. we had hundred mile-per-hour winds. Trees were being blown down all over the place. There was a mess. And in the midst of the storm, nobody ventured out. We all stayed hunkered down in our huts. When the storm was over the next morning at dawn, we could come out and survey the damage and figure out what had to be done. You don't go exposing yourself to a storm if you don't have to.

The same principle applies to the mind. When these things come storming through the mind, you've just got to sidestep them. And through the practice of meditation, find which spot is your spot in the body, the spot that you can keep calm, the spot where you feel at home. Learn to treasure that spot. Learn to keep after it, keep looking after it. And when necessary, learn to hide out there. As that passage on equanimity reminds us, there are certain times where it's simply the force of karma that the situations are going to be bad. There's not much you can do about them. But the important things are that you maintain your equanimity and learn how to hide out. Come out when there are times you actually can make

a difference, so that you don't waste your energy on unnecessary battles. Because the same principle applies inside as applies outside: If you wait until you find the absolutely perfect place to meditate, the perfect situation, you'll never meditate. You've got to put up with imperfections and learn how to work around them.

The same inside: There are times you can't get everything comfortable, there are times when there's a storm going on in the mind, so you find a place to hide out and you stay there. That way, at the very least, the things that you are responsible for—your choices in the present moment—are intelligent choices. They don't create bad ramifications. You don't continue the chain of negative forces coming from the past. You just let them blow through, and then come out and deal with things when you're in a better position.

So an important point in meditation is finding out where your home base is and then maintaining that. Don't get complacent. Sometimes it seems once you've found it, it's the most natural thing to stay there. The mind is always going to come back. But if you start getting complacent, it starts getting less protected and sometimes when you need it, you can't find it. So if you have found your spot, keep looking after it, maintain it, treasure it. As it gets stronger, it'll be able to send its influence out, both into the body and into your actions, into the world around you.

Just make sure your foundation is strong. There are times when it seems as if heedfulness wouldn't make any difference at all, but it does. If you're careful about what you do, careful about finding where your allies are inside, maintaining them, it really will make a difference, no matter how bleak the outlook may seem.

The Buddha says there's always the possibility of freedom. Nothing can ever get so bad that it'll end that possibility. So always keep that potential in mind, and maintain what little areas of freedom you can find in the present moment. It's by maintaining them that they get strong. It's like physical exercise: You exercise the body, it gets stronger. You exercise your freedom in the present moment, and that freedom will expand.