

The Balance of Power

May 13, 2006

There's a balance of power in the mind, in the same way that there's a balance of power in the world outside. We have a lot of different desires, and there's a tension among them. But as long as each of them has its say in one way or the other, things are relatively peaceful. Not really peaceful inside, there's a lot of pulling and pushing. And there is a lot of hype and desires come along. Each of them says, hey, I am your friend. I can bring you happiness. And when you give in, the desire doesn't seem all that bad. Whether it really gives you happiness or not, that's another matter.

Psychologists have found that we are really bad at figuring out what's going to give us true happiness. We tend to overestimate almost all of our desires. That's what keeps us going, going, searching for this, searching for that, keeping on looking for new things. And then every once in awhile, things begin to break down. We begin to realize that the desires we've been befriending all along are not really our true friends. Like that chant just now on friendship—it wasn't referring only to outside friends and non-friends. We have inside friends and non-friends, the ones who flatter and cajole, our companions in ruinous fun, some of our desires are like that. When you realize that, you want to switch to other desires. A desire comes into the mind for some real peace. Wouldn't it be good if we could find true happiness? A happiness that doesn't cause any harm to ourselves, doesn't cause any harm to anybody else, seems like a perfectly reasonable desire. But then you see parts of the mind will rebel. They'll fight back.

It's the same as with the world outside. Look on the TV and it's like every corporation in the world is your friend. They bring the good things to life as they say. But then if you start looking into their business practices, you find they are pretty nefarious. Some of them make their money off genuine suffering of other people. And some of them actually find that war is to their best interest. If you try to imagine a world order in which everybody could live together peacefully, it seems sensible, why can't we live together peacefully? Why can't people not cause harm to one another? But there are interests out there that would actually lose if there were peace, if there were no suffering. And they fight back. The more you try to cause a revolution in the world outside, the more these powers fight back at you, try to divert your attention from the real issue. If they can't do that, then it's out-and-out battle.

So you need allies. It's the same in the mind. If you are going to create a revolution in the mind where the mind can actually function without causing any harm to itself or other people, you need allies in the fight. This is why we meditate. This is why we develop right concentration. This is our main ally. In the comparison they have of the different qualities on the path, concentration is your food. It's what gives your nourishment.

So you want to develop these allies as much you can. In other words the idea of being peaceful, a mind that causes no harm, it sounds nice but if it doesn't give you some immediate visceral pleasure, it's going to be a hard uphill battle.

Because your other desires say: quick, look, here is a quick fix. Just do this, do that, you'll feel great. Even though the feeling great may not last long, there is a part of you that gives in very easily. That finds it hard to wait for results way down the line. So in order to get that part of the mind on your side, you say, here, here's a nice comfortable breath, breathe in a way that feels good, breathe in a way that feels refreshing, gratifying. Experiment to see what kind of breathing will do that for you. You make the breath your friend. The pleasure that comes from comfortable breathing, that can be your friend as well.

So figure out how to experiment with the breath, because sometimes just the process of experimentation takes a while before you can do it skillfully. In other words sometimes you push too much, you stretch the breath too much, you try to force things too much. You find tension in different parts of the body and you try to attack it too directly, then it fights back. What this means is you've got to learn to develop some more finesse, that's something that comes with time. At the very least try to get at least one part of the body that feels good. Try to find the part that feels central, that you are on really intimate terms with. At least make this part good. So it feels comfortable as you breathe in, you are not squeezing or pushing it or pulling it, and then allow it to maintain that sense of ease as you breathe out. If there's any tension or tightness that you can detect there, allow that to dissolve away. In this way you begin to find a friend inside. Then the parts of the mind that want some immediate gratification, they'll become your friends too, they'll like it. Then you work on allowing that sense of ease to spread to different parts the body.

And this is something each of us has to find our own way of doing. In some cases you maintain your center on that original spot and just think of expanding your frame of awareness, your field of awareness to be larger and larger and larger, and then think of the ease spreading along with your awareness. That's one way of doing it.

Another way is to go through the body section by section. Ajaan Lee has you start at the back of the neck, going down the back. Some people find that easy, other people find it hard. If you find it hard, you might want to start, say around the navel, because the movement of the breath is easier to see there. So make sure that your abdomen is relaxed as you breathe in, relaxed as you breathe out. Then go around to the back, the small of the back, keep that relaxed. Any parts of the back that seem to be pulling you out of a nice straight posture, allow those to relax. So again they stay relaxed as you breathe in, relaxed as you breathe out. And then move up, solar plexus, then around the body from the solar plexus to the back at the same height, and back to the solar plexus again. Then move up to the middle of the chest, and the same way around the body in the chest area, then the base of the throat, and the head. You can go down the shoulders to the arms, and then start at the hips, going down the legs to the toes. Work through the body, section by section, making sure that whatever section you're focused on feels at least undisturbed by the breath. And there may actually be a sensation that's related to the breathing process, so allow it to feel comfortable as you breathe in, comfortable as you breathe out. And you can go through the body like this as many times as you like, until you are ready to settle down. Then find one spot then spread your awareness out from that spot. So you are aware of the whole body breathing in, the whole body breathing out. And it feels good, it

feels connected.

This way you are beginning to get a friend, you've got your allies in this revolution. Because there will be parts of the mind that start complaining. They don't get to wander around as they used to. They don't have the run of the place that they are used to having. But with the sense of full body awareness, it feels good, feels refreshing just to breathe. That begins to change the balance of power. This is not to say that it will gradually all become more and more peaceful without problems, there will be ups and downs. But over time you find that there is a shift and when there is this sense of ease, you have to be careful not to just wallow in it and forget where it comes from. It comes from your alertness and your mindfulness. Mindfulness is keeping the breath in mind, keeping the various techniques that you are going to use with the breath in mind. Alertness is checking to see how things are going. In terms of right concentration or what they call jhana, these then develop into directed thought and evaluation. Directed thought is when you keep your thoughts on one topic. And then evaluation is that you check how things are going and making adjustments as you need to. Then the other factor is singleness of preoccupation, means you really are one with the breath. It feels like the breath is filling the whole body, your awareness is filling the whole body. Everything is one, it's not splitting off into two, three, four, five, the way it normally does.

So those are the causes. Make sure you've got the causes right. Then the sense of ease, sense of refreshment, of rapture, those will come. And as long as you stay with the causes, the ease and rapture will just keep on coming. It's like having a job. As long as you stick with the job, your wages keep coming. If you decide I've had enough of this working, I want to enjoy the wages, well there is no more income. And you find yourself soon at the end of your money. But if you keep on working, the results keep on coming. This is work in pleasure. You are working with your very intimate sense of the body. You are working in a way that makes it feel good.

This is why the Buddha said this is such an important part of the practice, because it gives you your allies. And also opens your mind to new possibilities. It is possible to find a sense of happiness, a sense of ease, refreshment without following your old sensory desires. The passage we looked at today during the study group, where the Buddha says it is possible that someone will know, have insight into the drawbacks of sensual desire. But if they don't know a pleasure that lies outside of sensual desire, it just won't make any difference, they'll just keep going back to their same old ways. But if you provide the mind with this alternative, there is a sense of ease and refreshment that comes simply from breathing, fully inhabiting your body, not running out after other things. Once you have that alternative, then it's a lot easier to look at the pleasure you used to get from indulging in sights, sounds, smells and tastes and tactile sensations. Seeing the drawbacks, being frank with yourself about the drawbacks. In the past it was hard to be frank about them, because you felt that, gosh, if you couldn't find pleasure here, where would you find it? There would be no pleasure in life at all.

But now you've got an alternative. That changes the balance of power. So you see right here, there's a sense of ease and refreshment. You don't have to spend all that time and money and effort chasing down things that just turn into

shadows and mirages. And even when you do get what you like in the outside world, it doesn't always stay with you. The Buddha compares it with borrowed goods. The original owners can take that away at any time. The pleasure, say, you get out of another person, doesn't really belong to you. It belongs to that other person. If they decide they've had enough of you, that's it. You don't have any rights.

There is the image of the man sitting in the tree. He comes to a fruit tree, there's no fruit on the ground but there is fruit in the tree. He knows how to climb the tree. So he goes up and he stays in the tree eating the fruit. Another man comes along, who also wants fruit, but he doesn't know how to climb the tree, but he has an ax in his hands. So he is going to chop the tree down. There are lots of drawbacks to sensual desire and it's easy for us to see them. But part of the mind refuses. It's afraid, because if we don't allow ourselves to get totally immersed in sensual desires, to really get carried away by them, we fear there is going to be no pleasure in life at all.

So it's important that you learn how to develop this sense of absorption in the breath, pleasurable, refreshing, feels really good just being here. That changes your sense of the range of possibilities. There is a pleasure that doesn't depend on those things outside, it's perfectly fine right here. It's nourishing. And even though simple concentration is not going to totally solve the problem of the way the mind causes itself suffering, it really changes the balance of power. You've got more allies in this revolution you are trying to create in the mind. Where the mind can live at peace with itself without causing any harm for you, any harm for anybody else. That's your desire.

As for the peace in the world, as the Buddha said, the world never has enough. It's insatiable. It's a slave to craving. But you don't have to be a slave to craving. You can free yourself by finding new allies in the fight. This is your path to freedom. It seems simple just watching the breath. It is not easy, but as you work with it and really approach it as developing a skill that may take time, it may take effort, but it's really worth all the time and all the effort. Because it does create that possibility that living without causing suffering, living without causing harm, living with true peace, at the very least with peace inside—that's a genuine possibility. And because it's possible, it's worth all the time and effort that goes into finding it, developing it, changing this balance of power in the mind.