

Allowing the Breath to Spread

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Find a spot in the body where the breath feels comfortable, and allow it to stay comfortable. And, notice the word “allow.” We’re not *making* the breath comfortable, we’re letting it be comfortable. So you don’t have to tense up around it, you don’t have to do a lot to it, just watch it. As for any pains there may be in the body, you don’t have to go to them. We know that one of the instructions in breath meditation, once you’ve been watching the breath as long or short, is to develop a whole-body awareness. But you have to build up to it. Sometimes it can be instantaneous. You focus on the breath and, as Ajaan Fuang used to say, the comfortable breath just explodes throughout the body, and there you are. Other times, you have to build up to it, because there may be parts of the body that don’t go the way you want them to. They may be painful no matter how you breathe. So in the beginning stages, don’t go there.

This is an important training for the mind right there, our tendency to fixate immediately on either pleasure or pain: pleasure, because we like it; pain, because we feel threatened by it, that we have to do something about it. And there are times when you have to tell yourself: Just don’t go there yet. You’re not ready for it. No matter how much you may be habituated to going to places like this, you have to train the mind to say: No, just stay right here, be content with what you’ve got.

It’s like that storm we had here several years back: six hours of hundred mile-per-hour winds, and there was nowhere you could go. You had to stay in your little hut. No matter how much you might be worried about what was going on in the rest of the monastery, you couldn’t go out to help because it was like going into a sandblaster. So you had to hunker down, just stay in your little spot where it was safe, and tell yourself: You’ll deal with whatever problems are happening on the outside later.

You may want the whole body to be comfortable, but when you can’t do it, when there are parts of the body in pain no matter how you breathe, you’re just butting your head against the wall to no purpose at all if keep trying to change them. So you just tell yourself: “I’m just not going to go there for the time being.” Ajaan Lee has a lot of analogies for this. One is of a house where some parts of the floorboards are rotten. If you’re going to lie down and sleep, you sleep on the parts where the boards are sound. Or a mango that has a couple of rotten spots: You don’t eat the rotten spots. You eat just the good flesh of the mango. Or of a person

starting an orchard: If you try to plant trees throughout the whole orchard all at once, you may run into a drought, and all the money you invested is going to dry away. So you start out in just a little part, plant a few trees, and as the trees grow, they begin to give fruits, and then you can plant those fruits. You don't have to invest a lot of money. Just let the trees help you plant your orchard. In other words, when you have to start small, you start small. And learn to content yourself with what you can make comfortable.

As for the parts you can't make comfortable, realize that part of the problem is that you add to the problem, you add to the pain, you add to the suffering. This right here gives you an important lesson in the Buddha's teachings on *dukkha*, or suffering. Some forms of suffering or stress are part of the three characteristics. In other words, everything conditioned is going to have some stress. There's not much you can do about that. But there are other kinds of suffering that are based on craving. That's stress in the four noble truths, which is based on craving. And because of the craving, you have your perceptions of your feelings that are based on craving, you have thought-constructs about your feelings that are based on a craving, even the ways you breathe are based on craving. And those are going to make the pain even worse. So remind yourself that the pain is not necessarily totally a given. Some of the pain you may be feeling has something to do with the way you're relating to it.

And one way to learn to see this is, in the very beginning, to refuse to label the pain. Just don't go there at all. It can have one part of the body, but you don't have to try to get in the same part of the body where it is. And you don't have to maintain a long, internal dialogue about how much the pain is, or how long it's been there, or how much longer it's going to be there, or how it's bothering you, or why the pain is happening. Any thought that goes in the direction of the pain, you just allow to fall away. That allows you to focus on what you *can* change, what you *can* maintain in terms of the sense of ease, the sense of well-being. It may not be large, but it's better than nothing.

So when you've found a spot in the body that you can make comfortable, think of it as precious. Look after it, tend to it, in the same way you would tend to a little garden in the city. The city, as a whole, has a lot of concrete, a lot of smoke, and a lot of pollution, but you try to create a little green spot. The difference here, of course, is that eventually you can let that green spot take over as it develops strength.

So start small, and if you have to keep it small, keep it small. Don't be in too great a hurry to move around. After a while, once that spot is really solidly established, *then* you can expand it. Or, if you want, you can stay focused there,

with the thought that if any sense of ease can come out of it and seep through the body, you'll be open to the idea that it can happen. Don't chase it around, don't push it here, don't push it there. Just think: Okay, there's a sense of ease, and it can radiate in any direction it wants to. Your duty is to just stay focused right there.