

# *A Warrior's Stronghold*

*November 10, 2006*

Sit with your back straight, facing straight ahead, and your eyes closed. Place your hands on your lap, right hand on top of your left, and notice your breathing. Where do you feel the breathing? What are the sensations in the body that tell you now the breath is coming in, now the breath is going out? Focus on those sensations. Allow them to feel relaxed. There will be a certain amount of tension when you first meditate, because you're not used to focusing on one thing for long periods of time, especially something as subtle and immediate as the breath. For the most part, we're more used to focusing on our ideas and emotions, or on things outside. So it takes a while for the mind to get used to being at home, focusing on something inside the body.

Allow the sensation of the breathing to be as relaxed as possible. Think of the breath energy as something that already fills the body. As you breathe in, you're simply adding more breath energy, infusing it into the energy already there. When you breathe out, you're not trying to squeeze everything out. If all of the breath were squeezed out of the body, you would die. So try to find the right balance. At what point does an out-breath start feeling uncomfortable? When you sense that point, stop breathing out; start breathing in. At what point does an in-breath start feeling uncomfortable? Stop there and allow yourself to breathe out again. Learn how to surf the breath in the same way you'd surf a wave. In other words, try to maintain a balanced sense of ease in the body whether the wave tends right or left. That sense of ease is going to be your friend.

Without that sense of ease, the mind starts flailing around, grasping at all kinds of other things. The idea may seem strange, but the more ease you can create for yourself inside, the more you're actually creating a gift for the world around you. If you don't have this inner sense of ease and wellbeing, the mind starts grasping at things outside, latching on to things outside, hoping to build some kind of happiness there. That places a burden on other people. But when you're more self-sufficient like this, you're less grasping. You're creating less of a burden.

One of the images of a well-concentrated mind is of a lotus saturated with water. Some lotus flowers don't ever get up above the water. They just stay immersed under the surface, saturated with water from their roots up to the tip. Try to think of your body as being saturated in the same way with a cool sense of ease. That lotus can be your gift, both to yourself and to the people around you.

At the same time, you're establishing a good basis within the body for a clear, mindful state of mind, an alert state of mind. All too often our emotions take over the body. When fear comes in, there's a reaction in your heartbeat. Hormones start getting poured into the blood, changing your heartbeat, changing the way you breathe, creating tension in the different muscles of the body.

When there's anger, when there's fear, all these emotions create changes in the body. They basically take it over. The mind then feels that it's been usurped, and it goes along with whatever the emotion is. It's like a coup. Anger comes in, and it may not be well thought through, it may not actually be in your best interest to act on the anger, but the anger seems to have seized power. So you go along with it. Then afterwards, you ask yourself, "Why did that happen? Why did I let myself fall for that?" The same with fear, the same with all of these other emotions: They seem to take over the mind.

They start by taking over the body. So your first tactic in learning how to counteract them is to get the body on your side. Get familiar with how good breathing feels. Then when another emotion comes in, you can realize that although the emotion may create a certain reaction in the body, it doesn't have to possess the whole body, just as it doesn't have to possess the whole mind.

Ordinarily, we tend to be unskillful in how we relate to our emotions. One of the important skills in meditation is learning more skillful ways of handling them. For the most part, we think we have to either give in to the emotion or else to deny that it's there, just totally repress it out of existence. Of course, repressing it doesn't really get rid of it. It just goes underground like "The Thing" and sends up tentacles someplace else. And simply giving in to the emotion doesn't get rid of it either. You simply turn it into bad kamma, which will come back and get you someday.

But as you meditate, you're learning alternative ways of dealing with these emotions, so that you don't have to give in to them, but at the same time you don't pretend that they don't exist. You admit that they're there, but you also admit that they don't have to take over the whole body. This requires concentration, it requires mindfulness, along with some discernment—the discernment being the realization that just because there's an emotion in the mind, it doesn't mean that it's your true feeling about something. It's simply a feeling that came up, a desire that came up to react in a certain way.

But you have other desires as well, such as the desire not to do something foolish and unskillful. That's a desire to be cultivated and strengthened. One way of strengthening it is to give it its corner of the body as well. The hormones may be racing through your bloodstream, but you can still determine the way you're going to breathe. You can counteract what the hormones are demanding by

consciously breathing in another way. It may not feel all that satisfying to have only one corner of the body, but sometimes a wise warrior will realize that he can't defend his whole territory. So you establish a base in one part and then, from that one part, you can eventually reclaim the rest of your body.

This also means developing the proper attitude when things are not going the way you'd like them to. Problems come up, and you'd rather not have those particular problems. Saunas get set on fire. You'd rather not have the sauna set on fire, but you don't give in to your regret for the sauna. You do what has to be done to put the fire out and keep it from spreading. Storms come in, knock down trees. You don't go running around outside trying to push the trees back up in the midst of the storm. You find a safe place to stay and wait until the storm is over. You tell yourself, "I'll survey the damage when the storm has passed, but in the mean time I'll just hunker down right here." Instead of getting upset about how much damage might be done, you focus on maintaining your safety and calm.

We've had a couple of really bad storms here at the monastery: so much wind and so much rain, and all you could do was find a safe hut where you were fairly sure the hut wouldn't get blown down on top of you. As for the rest of the orchard, it had to take care of itself until things were safe enough for you to come back outside.

Try to develop the same attitude toward emotional storms in your mind and your body. Keep thinking of the mind as a committee. There are lots of people in there, lots of ideas, some of which are helpful, some of which are actually destructive to your own wellbeing. You can't regard the destructive ones as your own true emotions or your own true ideas. They may be real, but they're not the "true you."

Ajaan Lee has a good way of thinking about these things. He says you have lots of germs and worms and other things in your body, so maybe these thoughts coming through your brain are actually *their* thoughts. After all, they're going through your bloodstream, the bloodstream is going through your brain, so who knows who's responsible for thinking what thought? Just keeping that perspective in mind helps pull you back when you're tempted to jump right into the thought. You're not denying that the thoughts are there; you simply realize that you have the choice as to whether to take them on, to develop them. The same holds true when the body isn't feeling well.

Your meditation may not be going as well as you'd like it to, but you don't give up, you don't just throw it away. You just lower your immediate expectations. You lower your demands on the meditation. Again, like a skillful warrior: When you find that you can't defend the whole territory, you find one little corner that you *can* defend, and you take that as your stronghold.

This is why it's very useful to have a very fluid sense of yourself. As a meditator, you're not asked to give up your sense of self totally right from the start. You just learn how to use your sense of self more skillfully. Make it more adaptable. When some parts of the body are really painful, establish your stronghold in the parts that you can make more comfortable, through the way you breathe, the way you relax your muscles around them. Then, from this position of relative strength, if you have the energy, you can start looking into the pain.

Learn how to make the distinction between feeling sensations and body sensations. Body sensations are things like warmth, coolness, solidity, energy—what are called the four elements or the four properties. Feeling sensations are the fleeting sensations of pleasure and pain. Those are very different sorts of things—the feeling sensations and the body sensations—but we tend to glom them all together. In particular, if there's a pain you tend to glom it together with sensations of solidity, so that your knee is solid pain, or your head is solid pain. Then you start using the pained parts to do your breathing, which makes things even worse.

But when the mind is in the right position, with the right attitude, you can look into the pain, not with the idea of making it go away, but with the idea of understanding it: "Okay, which sensations in here are pain sensations, which ones are earth, liquid, fire sensations?" If you have to hold on to something, hold on to the body sensations, and let the pain go. Let it do its fleeting, flitting-around thing. Or, even better, hold on just to the awareness that's aware of these different sensations, the question that makes these distinctions, if you can separate the awareness and the question out. That's where discernment comes in.

If you don't have the energy to do this kind of questioning, at least maintain your sense of stronghold in another part of the body. Guard against the thoughts commenting on how long the pain or exhaustion has been going on, or how much longer it might go on. Don't think about those things, for they're not helpful at all. The helpful thoughts are saying, "How do I maintain my awareness right now? How do I deal with the sensation I'm feeling right now?" As for the sensation of the pain you felt two seconds ago, you can let it go. It's not there any more. All that's there is your memory of it and the stories you've built around it. As for how many more hours, or days, or weeks the pain is going to keep going on, don't think about those things. Otherwise, you weigh the present moment down with too long a stretch of time, too many burdens, so of course it's going to cave in. Give it just the duty of being with the present moment. Thoughts of who you were in the past or who you're going to be in the future are unskillful ideas of self right now. Adjust your sense of who you are to

fit the amount of wellbeing you can actually maintain. That can be your stronghold.

So, learn to be a warrior. Sometimes warriors have to admit temporary defeat, sometimes they have to go into retreat, but they don't totally give in. They simply adjust their tactics to deal with the situation as it presents itself. Just like the situation in Thailand when England and France were gobbling up colonies: Thailand had to give up some of its provinces. It was either that or else give up its independence entirely. So the Thais were willing to make sacrifices in order to maintain at least something of their sovereignty. As a Thai saying goes, if you have to give up your arm to save your life, choose your life over the arm. There are times when the body is sick and you have to give up your sense of yourself as being strong and healthy—at least for the time being. “Okay, I’m sick. I’ve got to deal with this sickness with the tools I’ve got.” Don’t totally give in.

The same with your emotions: Sometimes your emotions get really strong, and you have to lie low. The emotion is there, but you don't have to identify with it. This is your alternative. You don't have to act on the emotion and you don't have to squeeze it behind a mental partition and deny that it's there. You admit that it's there and then just lay claim to another part of the mind, another part of the body, as your stronghold for the time being. That way, even though you're in reduced circumstances, you're not totally wiped out. You're still developing some very important habits: the patience, endurance, concentration, mindfulness, and discernment that will serve you in good stead no matter what the situation.

The Buddha never promised us that everything was going to be lovely in the present moment, or that all you have to do is think nice thoughts and the world will be nice in return. He keeps having us reflect on the fact that aging, illness, and death are normal. The world is swept away, he says. It does not endure. It offers no shelter. There is no one in charge. But, he says, here are the tools for finding happiness in the midst of a world that's getting swept away all the time. These are your weapons; this is your stronghold. Just make sure that you maintain that heart of a warrior and the wisdom of a warrior who knows which battles are worth taking on, which are worth dropping, which ones are worth avoiding. That wisdom is what will see you through.