

## *Stay*

*March 21, 2007*

One of the basic principles of the Dhamma is, in Pali, *Attā hi attano nātho*. In English, it's, "The self is its own mainstay." In other words, you have to learn how to depend on yourself. One of the most disconcerting things in life is looking at yourself and seeing how undependable you can be, not only with regard to other people but also with regard to yourself. You make up your mind to do something and then you find yourself doing something else. You look at something and it seems obvious, but then it turns out to something totally different from what you saw. So when the Buddha says the self is its own mainstay, that's actually a goal toward which we're trying to move. You're learning how to make yourself more dependable.

Part of this involves learning from other people, and another part involves learning how to be more observant so that you can trust your powers of observation. That means you have to develop them. You have to start off with a good fixed point of reference. It's like sitting in a train in a station. You look out and see another train next to you, and you realize that either your train is moving relative to it or it's moving relative to you, but you don't know which unless you can see a post or something else that's firmly fixed to the ground.

This is one of the things we're doing as we meditate: giving the mind a firm post fixed to the ground so that you can see the movements of the mind. In other words, when the mind moves, it usually can't see its own movements. But if you give it something nearby to focus on, then you begin to get a sense of when the mind is present and when it's going off someplace else.

So we take the breath as our point of reference, not only because it helps keep us anchored in the present moment, but also because, as you get more and more familiar with the breath, you begin to see that it's a mirror for the mind. When you're feeling anxious, you breathe in a certain way. When there's greed, when there's lust, when there's anger, you have different ways of breathing. You can learn how to read the breath and the mind in this way. You gain a better sense of when the mind is in a state where it can be relied on and when it can't. Or if you know that you're angry, you stop and tell yourself, wait a minute, as long as anger is taking over the mind, you can't rely on your perceptions.

At the very least, you try to ease the breath, get the breath back to normal. The process of getting the breath back to normal requires that you stop being angry and start being meticulous and observant. In other words, you get out of that

angry state of mind at least for a moment. Then you can look at it from a different perspective. You look at the situation from a different perspective. That way, you'll see things differently. The hormones may still be racing through your blood, but at least you've got your point of reference so that you can resist their influence.

This is important because there are so many things that we need to observe, not only in the world around us, but also within the mind. If you want to reflect on what's going on in the mind, you need to have a discipline, you need to have a point of departure. Otherwise, you're just going to thrash around aimlessly. You may come up with some interesting insights, but then the question is, one, are they really genuine? And two, even if they are genuine, are they going to go to the heart? Is the mind going to be receptive to take that insight and really work with it to develop it, to internalize it?

This is where the breath comes in handy as your foundation, as your point of discipline, because as long as the breath is normal, as Ajaan Lee says, it's as if you've got a mirror that's flat and not wavy. When the mirror is flat, you can look in the mirror and you see yourself for what you actually are. If it's a fun house mirror, you get all sorts of weird, warped perceptions.

So make the breath flat and smooth and easy, as comfortable throughout the body as you can. That helps you see what's going on in the mind more clearly, especially when you get to the point where the in-and-out breath actually seems to stop and you're just left with this still but vibrant energy field in the body. When you've been able to get the breath to that point, not only can you see things more clearly, but the mind is also more receptive, more apt to absorb what it sees.

Often the important insights in life are not the ones you want to see or hear. This is one of the reasons why they're so hard to attain: because the mind resists them. But if you could put the mind in a better mood, it's like getting someone well fed and well rested so that you can break some unfortunate news to them, and they'll be in a better position to take it in.

After all, what are you going to see when you really see the patterns of the mind? You'll see how bullheaded you've been, how ignorant you've been, how blind you've been, sometimes how stupid you've been: things we don't like to see, but they're necessary if you're going to make changes in your life.

So staying with the breath, getting it normal, at ease, filling the body so that your awareness can fill the body as well, you eliminate blind spots and you get the mind basically softened up so that it's in a better position to absorb the insights that are going to come.

Now, for this to work, it requires that you spend a lot of time with the breath. This is why we practice again and again and again with the breath, so that we're not only more aware of the subtleties in the breath, but we can also learn how to trust the breath more. This is an important element of the meditation. This is the place we can hold onto. This is your refuge. You learn through experience that what you see in the mind while the breath is still, while the breath is normal, when the mind is firmly with the breath, actually provides you with insights that you can use. You can put them into practice and see that you get results, and you're also in a better position to judge those results.

So as you're meditating, resist any temptation, any urge to go away from the breath. The best way to do that is to make the breath an inviting place to be, an interesting place to be. There's breath energy in the body, and there are many levels to it. There's the in-and-out breath, then there are the subtler breath energies that flow with the blood, that go along the nervous system, and even spots in the body where the breath energy seems totally still. You can think of these as different levels of subtlety in the breath, that these different levels of the breath interpenetrate one another, and it's a matter of tuning in. You find that different ways of breathing can help ease pains or feelings of blockage in the body in different spots. You see that focusing on different levels of subtlety in the breath can make the body more inviting, make it a more comfortable place to stay. It's easier to stay in the present moment because you like being there.

And you've got to learn how to stick with the breath, not only in terms of obvious distractions like thoughts of the past, thoughts of the future, but also in terms of things that come up in the meditation that are sometimes the result of the concentration. States of pleasure, states of rapture, can arise. Visions can arise. You can take these as signs, but you don't want to move into them, in the same way that when you're driving down a road and see a sign ahead, you don't go up and drive on the sign. You stay on the road.

Remind yourself, the breath here is the road. It's your the path. A vision may come up, which may be a sign that the mind is beginning to settle down. Take it just as that: a sign that the mind settling down, not a sign of something else more portentous that has some inherent meaning. Just because something comes up in the quiet mind doesn't mean it's necessarily true or reliable, because even the insights that come up in the meditation, you've got to double check, you've got to put them into practice to test them, to see what kind of results they give.

This is how Ajaan Mun was able to keep himself from wandering astray. A lot of his practice lay in learning how to teach himself how to monitor his practice, and it involved just this. He was a meditator who tended to have lots of visions,

and the question was: How far can you trust them? What do they mean? How are they useful? That was the big question: How are they useful? How can you get use out of the meditation without getting misled by it? In each case, it was a question of, one, asking: Is there a Dharma lesson here? Sometimes the lesson lay in watching how a vision formed and how it fell apart. Or if there seemed to be a particular lesson in terms of the content of the vision, you wouldn't necessarily believe it. You put it to the test: If you can actually take this as an assumption and put it to use in your life, what results do you get?

So even though insights that come up in the still mind tend to be more reliable than the insights that come up when your mind is rushing around, still, just because they arise doesn't mean that you can fully depend on them until you put them to the test.

This is another way in which you have to learn how to depend on yourself and make yourself more reliable.

As for states of ease and rapture, again don't let them pull you away from the breath. They're signs. You learn how to breathe in such a way that you can maintain them because they are an important part of the practice. As Ajaan Fuang once said, they're the lubricants that keep the practice going. Otherwise, it dries up, seizes up, and you lose the desire to practice, because there's no fun in it, there's no enjoyment. So the ease and the rapture give a chance for both the body to settle down, to be at ease, and for the mind to gain a sense of ease and rapture.

But you don't have to jump into the ease and rapture in order to get full benefit from them. Stay with the cause, which is the mind focused on the breath, with a sense of steadiness, a sense of finesse, and the ease and rapture will do their work. You don't have to squeeze them or hug them or do anything to make them do more work than they can. The point will come when they've done their work, there's enough of them, and then the mind to move to a subtler level. Here again, stay with the breath and let these things fall away.

This is the discipline of the meditation. A lot of times we don't like the word discipline, but it's important element in learning how to see, to see more consistently, to see more reliably.

Often we think one of the reasons we can't see the truth in our lives is because the truth is hidden. We try to look into deeper and deeper layers, but actually what happens is that we tend to get more and more into abstraction and further and further away from what's actually happening. There are a lot of studies that show that often the details we need to see in other people's behavior to tell what's going on in their minds are right there, written all over their faces, but we don't see them. We're looking at something else. We're looking for something else.

We're trying to second-guess what's going on behind the face, and don't look right at the face itself, to see the micro-expressions that flit across it. Some people instinctively notice them; other people don't seem to. What's interesting is that you can be taught how to see these things. It takes time, takes concentration, takes dedication, it takes the willingness to make mistakes and learn from them. But after a while, you begin to notice them as well.

The same goes for the mind. The mind shows its defilements, it shows its ignorance and all of its other problems pretty much on the surface, but we're trying to look past the surface all the time, so we don't see them. When you're with the breath, you're right here where the mind and the body meet. You're right at the surface of the mind, looking at its movements as they're happening, and this way the details of its behavior become clear.

Where do you think the Buddha learned dependent co-arising and all those other subtle teachings? Looking right at the surface movements of the mind. They're all here, but we're too busy looking past them. So if you learn how to look more consistently here in the present moment, this is the discipline of the meditation that keeps you from constantly second-guessing things and trying to theorize about what's going on behind the scenes. You look here for the movements of the mind and you'll see them. You see what causes suffering, what doesn't cause suffering. It's all right here, but you need the discipline to keep yourself at this point of reference where everything shows itself and where everything can be tested.

So when you want to reflect on what's going on in your life, here is where you find that you haven't been able to depend on yourself. If you'd like to depend both on your powers of observation and on your intentions more, this is the point from which it all the departs, where it all takes its stance. So get used to staying here consistently, again and again and again, as continuously as possible. The more continuous your awareness, the more you'll see.