

## *Centered in the Body*

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In one of the suttas on mindfulness of the body, the Buddha gives an image of how we should practice. He says: Suppose there's a man, and they've placed a bowl of oil on his head. The bowl is full to the brim. There's a beauty queen who is singing and dancing, and a crowd of people excited about the beauty queen singing and dancing, and the man has to walk between the two. There's another man following behind him with a raised sword, and if the first man lets even a drop of oil spill, the man with the raised sword is going to cut off his head. So the Buddha asks: Will that first man allow his attention to be distracted by the beauty queen or by the crowd? And the answer, of course, is No, because he knows he would die.

We should try to practice our mindfulness of the body with the same attitude: If our mindfulness slips, our goodness will die. Whatever the situation, keep yourself in the body, be in touch with the energy in the body, how the breath is feeling. You may not be able to follow all the details of the in-and-out breath, but you can have a general sense of how the body feels.

Or you can choose one spot in the body as your spot and stay there. Always be in touch with that one spot. Allow it to be relaxed, let the blood flow smoothly, openly through that spot, and just keep in touch with it to notice when it gets constricted and when not. It's good to choose a spot on the body that tends to tighten up when you get anxious or fearful, and do everything you can to keep that spot open, even in situations where you feel anxiety or fear—knowing that if you lose focus, defilements are going to cut off your head, ignorance is going to put a big bag over your head so you can't see anything.

What this means, of course, is that our practice is meant to be taken throughout all of our life, not just while we're sitting here with our eyes closed. The lessons we learn sitting with your eyes closed are not meant to be left here on your meditation spot. The training is in how you go through life as a whole, how to maintain contact with the breath in spite of distractions. While you're sitting here with your eyes closed, the distractions are almost entirely mental. You should take this same attitude toward external distractions. The meditation lessons are lessons on how to live.

That image of the beauty queen singing and dancing can stand for external attractions, and the crowd, of course, is all the stuff flowing up from your mind, reacting, looking for things out there. The mind doesn't just react. It also goes out

looking for things. It flows out. This is Ajaan Lee's explanation of the word *asava*. And Luang Puu Dune also talks about how the mind, flowing out, is the cause of suffering. So you want to be able to see the flow.

And notice in that image, there's only one person on one side to stand for external objects, but there's a whole crowd on the other side. You've got lots and lots of hungers and thirsts, desires, aversions, that can be excited at any time. And the only way you're going to see these things is if you don't flow along with them.

This is why you want to maintain that inner focus. You have your spot where you stay. The only way you can see things flowing, have a sense of how fast they're flowing, how strong they are flowing, where they're coming from, is if you stand still. It's like those markers they have on the side of the river that tell how high the rivers have gone. They want to measure when it's flooding, when it's low, how high the flood is, how low the water is when it's low. If the marker were to go up or down or to float down the river, you'd have no idea of the river's level.

So you've got to find one spot where you stay centered, where you stand still, so that you can catch the flowing of the mind. Sometimes you do this while you're sitting. But a lot of the really good insights come when you're doing walking meditation, or just going around doing your chores in the course of the day. Because sometimes when you're sitting in meditation, it's like a schoolroom of kids who behave while their teacher is in the room. It's when the teacher is a little bit distracted that some of the kids get a sense that they can sneak around, or play, or run around the room, or whatever.

And it's the same with walking meditation. Even when you're very focused in walking meditation, you still have to be aware of how the body is moving, when you're coming to the end of the path. That slight bit of distraction can often leave a little bit of opening. As they say in Thai, *suam roi*: The defilements can step in your footsteps as you're looking out, and all of a sudden you find yourself gone if you're not paying attention. But walking meditation is a good opportunity to see how the mind flows out. You're trying to maintain your center and you notice that it gets a little wobbly. Okay, why is it getting a little wobbly? It's not so much from the impact of things flowing in. It's things flowing out.

There's a physical sense that goes with the mind flowing out. And a good place to catch this is right there at the tip of the sternum, right in the area of the heart. There's an outflow of energy and if you can catch it, you can see it flowing out. But you don't flow with it. That's your opportunity to see when there is a flow, how strong it is, and where the flow is coming from.

When you've learned to do this while you're walking, then you can start doing it in all your other activities. But the important thing is that you have that sense of

a balanced center, like the man with the bowl of oil on his head. You have to be very centered, very balanced. Otherwise it's like trying to throw a pot on a potter's wheel. If you're not balanced and centered, your hands are going to slip a little bit, and the pot's not going to be a pot. It's going to be this mess of clay.

So as the world spins around you, you try to stay as centered as possible so that you can catch yourself flowing after the world. Again, the spinning is not so much the problem. It's that you tend to flow out and want to spin along with it. That's why we suffer.

So, as Ajaan Lee says, you want to know the objects after which you spin, but also the flow of the mind after them. And what's the awareness from which that flow comes? Check for these things. The only way you can do it, though, is to have that strong sense of center—established, firm, still—as the body moves through life. The lessons we're learning here, on how to stay with the center, are meant to be taken with you as you go, so that the day isn't divided up into times.

Ajaan Fuang had a nice image once. He said most of us live our lives divided into little times: time to eat, time to talk, time to do our chores, time to meditate. It all turns into times, he says. What you want to do is make your practice timeless, so that it's timeless throughout the day. No matter what time it is outside, it's always practice time inside. It's time to be centered inside. That's the only way you're going to understand anything.