

How to Be Alone

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As a culture, we don't have much practice in being alone, even though modern Western culture is unusual in the amount of privacy it offers in its homes. Ever since the 19th century, people in the West have slept in private bedrooms more than at any other time in history, or any other culture in history. You'd think that that would help us develop some skills in being by ourselves. But that's very rarely the case. When you're alone in your room, you're not really alone. Back in the 19th century, when people started living in private bedrooms, sales in novels shot up. Now in the 21st they have all sorts of companions in their rooms: books, magazines, TV, or the Internet. And so with all these clamorous companions, we don't have much practice in being alone, looking after ourselves.

That passage we chanted just now: "May I look after myself with ease." It doesn't refer to just being physically at ease. It also means learning how to look after your own mind, getting a sense of how to correct its imbalances. This is one of the treasures that the Buddha's teachings have to offer, in that it gives you some pointers in how to look after yourself, how to be alone and not go crazy, how not to get off balance, learning how to be self-correcting, self-governing.

Several years back when the book *Into the Wild* came out, I was struck by how much the protagonist had to reinvent the Dhamma wheel in figuring out how to live an authentic life, how to be alone facing the wilderness with just the company of his own mind. He didn't have many good resources to draw on: a few books—a little bit of Thoreau, a little bit of Tolstoy—and a lot of ideas, most of which were untested. I couldn't help thinking that if he'd been born in Thailand, he might not have died, for they have a whole tradition—the Buddha's teachings—that acts as a storehouse of wisdom on how to be alone. And the Sangha provides an opportunity to learn directly from people who've had lots of time alone, leading a purposeful life, and have come out stronger as a result.

So it's good to look into the Buddha's teachings not only for techniques in the meditation, but also for the attitudes you need in looking after yourself. Now, the techniques *are* important. They give you a good measuring stick for how things are going as you're alone; they give you something specific to do, a task to focus on, so as to create a sense of purpose over time, and of wellbeing in the present moment by being with your breath. At the very least, you learn how to approach from the physical side whatever mind state is coming in and oppressing you.

Mind states all have an effect on the breath, but the breath can also have an effect on them. If you're not skillful, this could become a vicious circle. You start breathing in weird ways, and that puts you in a bad mood, and then the bad mood makes the breathing get even stranger, and you go spiraling down.

Working with the techniques of breath meditation is one way of cutting those vicious circles, giving you a handle on your state of mind. But it's also important that you use right view in learning how to step back from your state of mind and evaluate it. To begin with, right view allows you to see where your thinking has gone off course. And second, it allows you to realize that you don't have to be immersed in a mood. One of the basic principles of right view is the principle of kamma, and one of the principles of kamma is that we have freedom of choice in the present moment. Yet this is an area where the wrong views of our culture get in the way. We tend to think that our moods are our real self. We tend not to trust our thoughts because we know we've picked up a lot of ideas from the media and other people around us, but our moods and emotions seem to be genuinely ours, who we *are* in the present moment. This is where the Buddha's teachings on understanding yourself are important. You don't have to identify with your mood. There is always a spot in the mind that's just simply aware of these things. And you want to learn how to stand in that spot.

Again, the meditation is helpful in this regard because it teaches you to create a state of mind and then step back and look at it. As in Ajaan Lee's analogy of learning how to make baskets: You make a basket, then you step back and look at it. Is it too long? Too short? Is the weaving coarse and irregular? See what's not right and then bring that observation along when you make another basket, and then another one. If you can learn to look at your moods as baskets—i.e., not who you really are, but simply things you've created—then you can start working on the raw materials and make better ones. But it's important that you have this ability to step back.

One of the images in the Canon is of a person sitting down looking at someone who's lying down, or a person standing who's looking at someone sitting down. In other words, you step back a bit, you're slightly above what's just happened, and you evaluate it.

That's the second part of the Buddha's approach: not only having a place to step back but also having good standards to evaluate things. For instance, when you're in a bad mood, there is a tendency—especially if you're in the West—to say, "Here I am. I'm finally being honest with myself and I'm miserable. I'm horrible. My life is going nowhere." We tend to think that that's getting down to the true facts of the situation, because it's so harsh. But why should we believe that? And in what way is it helpful? You might say, "Well, it's better to be realistic than living in fantasies," but your bad mood is just a mood. It doesn't

guarantee the truth of what you see while you're in that mood. And it's also self-defeating, for as the Buddha points out, it's possible to change your mood and to create moods that are a lot more useful in the practice. That's why one of the steps in breath meditation is learning how to gladden the mind when it needs to be gladdened. In other words, see where the mood is leading you, and if you don't like the direction it's heading, realize that you're free to look at things in a different way. You're not committed to the mood; after all, it's not committed to you. It comes and goes without asking your permission, so you don't need its permission to push it out.

During my first years as a monk, this was a very important part of the training: not only having the breath meditation technique to deal with whatever was coming up, but also having the opportunity to talk with someone sane—Ajaan Fuang—who had a lot of experience in being alone and learning to gauge what was a healthy mood and what was an unhealthy one. He had learned that regardless of how true you might think the mood is, you've got to look at its effects. Where is it leading you? After all, we're here to follow a path. So you can ask yourself, what kind of path is a depressed mood? What kind of path is an unhealthy mood? It's not a decent path at all. It's a path downward, not the path you want to follow.

So again, remind yourself that these moods are not necessarily true; they're not necessarily you. They're like a set of clothing: You can choose to put them on or you can take them off. The breath provides you with a place to step back and look at yourself, the way you'd look at yourself in a mirror. The Dhamma gives you a set of standards for judging what looks good in the mirror, what doesn't, what's healthy and what's not—realizing that sometimes the things that we're supposed to abandon at the end of the path are actually a help along the way. There's that sutta where Ananda talks about how desire is often helpful in the path, conceit can be helpful in the path—in other words the desire to do well, the conceit that says, "Other people can do this, why can't I?" Those are actually useful tools in the path.

All the skills we tend to associate with a healthy ego are also helpful in the path. For example, anticipation: learning how to anticipate danger—i.e., to see the danger in wallowing in a mood. In the Buddha's language, this is called heedfulness. Suppression: The skills that allow you skillfully to suppress moods that you know are not helpful. You don't repress the mood; you simply realize that you're not going to go running along with whatever mood comes running into the mind. If you see that it's an unskillful mood, you stand your ground and use the skills of the meditation to cut it off from its sources of strength. And you use the skills of shame and compunction—these are skills, if you know how to

use them right—to remind you of why you don't really want to follow a mood that would lead you to do something unprincipled or harmful.

Another important ego skill is sublimation, which means finding another kind of pleasure, another way of looking at things, to replace your current mood with a better one. This is what jhana is all about: providing a harmless kind of pleasure that you can tap into at all times, to provide you with the food you need so that you don't go hungering after unskillful pleasures. Another skill is humor, the ability to laugh at your foibles—not in a nasty, sarcastic way, but in a good-natured, large-hearted way. The surest sign that you've dropped a mood is when you see how ludicrous it is. And then there's altruism, realizing that in learning to look after yourself, you're also helping other people. Remember the Buddha's famous sutta on the two acrobats, where they realize, "If I look after my sense of balance, and you look after your sense of balance, that's how we're going to get down safely from this pole we're standing on." In other words, remind yourself that it's not a selfish thing to know how to look after yourself; you're not just gazing at your belly button. You're actually providing help to others. If you can't look after yourself, you become a burden to others.

This is why the Buddha, in his instructions on breath meditation, included the ability to gladden the mind when it needs to be gladdened—both in terms of the way you breathe, and in terms of the way you learn to think and talk to yourself. This involves your ability to step back and use the breath as a vantage point on whatever the depressed mood might be, and in developing a set of values that help you to recognize that this is something you don't want to get involved with. Actually, there's no limit to the number of the tools that can prove useful here: anything you've learned about how to change a mood—by the way you breathe, by the way you look at things, by what you focus on, what you choose to just let go.

There are also the skills of steadying the mind when the new mood you're trying to create is still unstable. What can you do to make it more and more solid? And then there are the skills of releasing the mind, knowing how to free the mind from a relatively skillful mood to reach an even more skillful one. Even when you've developed a skillful mood, you can then say, "Okay, this can take me only so far. What kind of mood would take me further?"

There's a passage where the Buddha talks about a meditator who finds, as he's focusing on the breath, that there's a fever in his mind. So he needs to change his topic for the time being, to find something more inspiring, more uplifting. That could include reflecting on the Buddha, the Dhamma, the Sangha, or whatever you find inspiring that relates to the practice. Then finally, once you've got the mind in a much better mood, when its fever has subsided, you can

go back to the breath, and the mind can really settle down. It can drop all that thinking and go to a place that's a lot more still, solid, and buoyant.

So when you find yourself overtaken by a mood, or if you're not really sure about how you should approach the meditation when things are going poorly, keep these points in mind. And you should also keep them in mind when things are going awfully well. We sometimes feel embarrassed to congratulate ourselves on how things are going, but that embarrassment doesn't help at all. Recognizing when the meditation is going well and learning how to appreciate when it's going well will give you a reference point. When you start getting discouraged about the whole process, you can remember that there *were* times when it went well. And it's really worth whatever effort it takes to get it going well again.

So to be able to look after your own mind and to thrive at being alone, you need a whole set of skills. You need a spot where you can step back and look at things, the right set of attitudes that help you gauge the situation for what it is, and then skills in creating and maintaining a better mood. This is how you look after yourself with ease. The skills that enable you to be more mature in general, also help make you a more mature meditator. In this way, as you meditate, you become your own best friend, instead of your own worst enemy. You learn how to handle being alone. And it's only when you can handle being alone that you can really handle being with other people. You don't get swept away by their ideas or their moods, and you can actually become a source of stability in their lives as well.

So keep this in mind when, say, in the middle of an afternoon, things don't seem to be going so well. Get up and walk around a bit. Clean out the tool shed. Hike up the mountain. Anything that works. One of my students, a monk in Thailand, once said that he'd get restless sometimes when he was staying alone in the wilderness, so he'd hike over a few mountains, just to get rid of the restlessness. Anything that works in getting you out of an unskillful mood and into a more skillful one—one that's ready to settle down—is an important part of the meditation.