

At Home in Your Own Skin

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Each of us lives in lots of different worlds, worlds inside, worlds outside that we share with others. And there's no clear boundary between the inside and the outside worlds. Many times we bring the outside in, and we go out to inhabit the outside. So it's no wonder that we frequently get knocked off balance, both because we don't really know which world we really inhabit, and because it's the nature of any world to be unstable. Our outside worlds are especially unstable, because we're constantly negotiating them with other people who are in the same worlds. It's like those vast computer games of alternate realities where lots of other people are playing at the same time. You're never really safe, you're never really sure who you're with. And if you need to inhabit that world, you have needs that you impose on them; they have needs that they impose on you. And the very condition of being in a world is unsafe. It's going to crash down on you if you're not careful.

This is why we meditate. We try to develop an inner world that we can inhabit with a fair degree of stability, at least enough stability so that we can gain a sense of balance and have a sense of home.

And also so that you can watch yourself when you go out to inhabit those other worlds. You can ask yourself, "Why are you going? What do you want? What can you do?" because sometimes you're going out to the worlds for your own interests and sometimes you're concerned about others. Sometimes your motivation is skillful. Sometimes it's good but not skillful. Sometimes it's neither good nor skillful. But going out is so much second nature that we hardly stop to think or to check what our motivation is. We just go out, go out, go out, and when we come back in, we drag outside worlds back in. So we don't really know where we are.

The purpose of the meditation is to have a clear sense of belonging right here. And to have enough mindfulness and alertness so that when you do go out, you are clear about your motivation and you can choose. If the motivation is good and skillful, you go. But you realize that you're going out basically on a foray. You're not going out to inhabit that other world. You're not going out to move there and settle down for a while. You're going because there are good things to be done, skillful things to be done. When you've done them, you come back home.

So the first order of business is to establish a place right here inside as your true home. Gain a sense of being at ease here. This is why you focus on the breath,

because the breath, of all the different elements and properties in the body, is the one that's closest to the mind. And it's the one you can use to adjust all the other properties so that you feel at home. Adjusting the breath is like knowing how to run a thermostat in your home. When it's too hot outside, you can come in and cool things down. When it's too cold outside, you can come in and warm things up.

So it's important that you develop a sense of being at home with the breath, familiar with the breath, knowing all of its ins and outs—and using the breath so that you can really inhabit the whole of your body, so that you can really be comfortable inside your own skin. Focus on the breath until it's comfortable. Find what rhythm and texture you like right now, and then gradually work through the body to see how the way you breathe relates to your experience of the different parts of the body. Are there some parts of the body that you tense up when you breathe in? Or that you squeeze when you breathe out? Try to breathe in and out without tensing or squeezing.

Then check the rest of the body. See if there are any other spots that you need to monitor in this way. Keep this up. Try to go systematically through the body. You could start at the navel, go up the front, down the back, out the legs and then start at the back of the neck again, go out the shoulders and the arms. Or you can start at the back of the neck. You can start anywhere, as long as you have a plan for how you're going to go through the body. After you've done this many times, you begin to get a sense of your own idiosyncrasies in how you breathe, which parts need to be focused on, as when there may be tension in the hip, or tension in your shoulders. And then you learn: Can you focus on those spots first, or do you have to wait until you've negotiated other parts of the body before you go to the really heavy areas of pressure?

In other words, you learn to make the meditation your own. Ajaan Lee gives the basic principles, but we each have our own peculiarities in the way we hold our body, the way we tense the body when we breathe, and what's the most comfortable way of learning how to release that tension. Sometimes you find that when you release the tension, the body feels unbalanced. This means that you've been holding pressure in one part of the body, and when you let it go it seems to move off to another part of the body and gets stuck. For a lot of people, things get stuck up in the head. When you find that happening, think of the energy flowing down the front of your neck all the way through the in-breath, all the way through the out-breath.

In other words, learn how to inhabit your body with a sense of ease and comfort, fullness, satisfaction. Breathe in a way that feels gratifying. Then learn

how to share that gratifying feeling with all the different parts of your body. Learn how to fully inhabit this world that you can create around the breath. And keep monitoring it so that it remains a comfortable place to stay, a good place to stay, a solid place to stay.

Now, you'll find that your thoughts may still tend to wander off because you've got all those other issues outside. But for the time being, tell yourself that the best way you're going to handle those issues is to develop the mental qualities that are strengthened by focusing right here. Concerns about other people, your worries about situations that happened: Regardless, the best way to handle those situations is for you to be well-established here inside, so that you're coming from a position of strength, a position of inner nourishment and ease. That way, when you go out, it's not that you're going out of hunger or out of fear. You're going because you have genuinely compassionate motives, skillful intentions.

If you catch yourself moving out without skillful intentions, realize that that's just what the Buddha calls becoming. It's a created little world, which if you inhabit it, is going to come crashing down. So you do your best to get out of it. It's like one of those dreams you find yourself in where things get more and more confining, and suddenly you remember that even though the dreams seems hopeless, it is just to dream. You can get out. Wake up. So whatever the little world that you create, if you find that it's a dangerous world, a precarious world, an unskillful world, you don't have any commitment to it. You can step back into the body.

And having the body as your foundation helps you also judge your dealings with other people—when you can be helpful, what the most helpful thing might be. And when you *can't* help: what to do in a case like that. It puts you in a position where you can read the situation, because you may have a lot of things invested in the situation. That's one of those outside worlds that you're trying to inhabit, and you want to make it as good as possible, but you've got mixed motives. In other words, you're making it as good as possible for yourself and you'd like to think you're making it as good as possible for the other person, too, but those mixed motives add an element of uncertainty, as your commitment to inhabiting the world can also blind you to the other person's real needs.

But if you know you've got a good solid place to stay here, then you don't have to inhabit that other world. You don't have to invest your hopes for happiness there. You can engage in that world when it seems to be skillful, and you can return here when you find that it's not. And as you place less of a burden on that outside world, you'll find that you are actually more helpful. It's easier to have

genuine feelings of goodwill for the other person and it's easier also to develop equanimity when that's the skillful choice, the skillful response.

This is why meditating is not a selfish act. It puts you in a position where you can be more skillful both in your inside worlds and in your outside worlds. And it gives you a clear sense of which world you can really inhabit, and which worlds you simply go into on foray. So while you're here, take advantage of the opportunity to get solidly established in this inside world. As I said, be as comfortable as possible in your own skin, this energy field that you have in the body. As you learn how to inhabit this world properly, you'll find that you can deal with other worlds with a lot less suffering.