

Full-Body Breath

May 11, 2009

Often when you set your mind on the breath, the hardest thoughts to let go are not the ones that are blatantly unskillful. They're the relatively skillful ones. There's a part of the mind that keeps telling you that you've got to be responsible for this. You've got to look after that. Can't let this go. If you let it go, you're being irresponsible. Those voices are very persuasive because they have good reasons—relatively good reasons.

This is why you have to come back at them with better reasons. If your mind is going to function well, if you're going to be able to handle the responsibilities without burning out, you need time to rest, time to put things down. There was a woman who came to Wat Dhammasathit to spend some time meditating. She was going to come and stay for two weeks. On the second day, though, she came to see Ajaan Fuang, saying she had to go home. He asked her why. She said, "Well, I keep thinking about my husband and my children. They need me. What are they going to do for food? Who's going to wash their clothing?" Ajaan Fuang said to her, "Just tell yourself that you've died. If you were dead, they'd have to find some way of handling these problems. So now's a good time for them to get some practice. They can handle these problems."

So one thing you can tell yourself right now is that the world doesn't need you to hold it up. If it were to collapse just from the fact you're going to be quiet for an hour, that would be one thing. But it'll keep on going. So tell yourself that you're not all that important to the outside world. What *is* important is the shape of your mind. That's something you have to live with. And of course it doesn't hurt that once your mind is in better shape, you're actually able to handle issues in the world a lot better.

So either way, if you are important, the world needs you to meditate. If you're not that important, they're not going to miss you. These are two arguments you can give to what Ajaan Fuang called the Deva Maras, the voices in the mind that tell you that you've got this or that responsibility—in other words, they tell you the good things you've got to worry about, the good things you've got to plan: tomorrow's meal, the future of the orchard, whatever the issue is that you tend to carry around and that weighs you down. If you don't want to get permanently bent over, you've got to learn to put these things down on a regular basis. Carry these duties lightly, so that you can stand up straight. You do them, but you don't give them any more thought than they really need.

This is probably the most important skill in meditation: realizing exactly how much thought your outside responsibilities really require, and how much is unnecessary, just a spinning of wheels, the type of thinking you go through because you're used to it, and it feels good because you're feeling responsible, but is not really all that necessary.

The Buddha mentioned that the point where he first got on the right track on the path was when he decided to divide his thoughts into two types: skillful thinking and unskillful thinking, harmless and harmful. Notice how he dealt with his thoughts. Instead of looking so much at the content, he saw that skillful thoughts were motivated by lack of greed, lack of aversion, lack of delusion, or by renunciation, lack of ill will, lack of harmfulness. Those thoughts would give good results. Unskillful thoughts were the ones based on sensual passion. He used the word, *sensuality*, which in the Canon means your passion for your passions. We're not so much attached to objects outside as we are to the mind's fascination with them, wanting to think about them, fantasize about them, plan for them, figure out how to gain that particular pleasure. Often there's a lot more pleasure involved in thinking about a piece of chocolate cake than there is the actual eating of the chocolate cake. That's what the Buddha meant by sensuality.

So thoughts imbued with sensuality, imbued with ill will, imbued with harmfulness: All these he classed as unskillful. With the unskillful thoughts, he would keep them in check. The comparison he gave was with a cowherd. In South Asia, cowherds have to make sure that their cows don't go into the rice fields, eat all the rice grains, trample the rice plants. So during the rainy season when the rice plants are growing, you have to be very careful to make sure they don't invade the rice fields. You have to keep close watch over them, holding them in check, beating them back. That was the image he gave for how to treat unskillful thoughts: beat them back.

As for the skillful ones, he said, it's like being a cowherd during the dry season. The rice has been harvested, and the cows can go pretty much anywhere. You don't have to worry about them trampling the fields or eating the rice, because there are no plants in the fields, there's no rice to be eaten. So the cowherd can just sit under a tree, and all he has to do is just keep in mind: "There are these cows out there." At some point he's going to have to bring them back in, but he doesn't have to be too careful about where they wander. That's how the Buddha would treat his skillful thoughts: dividing the skillful and unskillful ones in terms of what kind of mind state they came from and what kind of results they led to.

That's a useful lesson right there: Learn how to step out of your thought worlds and ask, Where does this thought come from and where does it go?

Instead of just jumping into the world to see how much fun you can have playing around in it, you step back from it a bit, get some perspective on it. But, he said, even with skillful thoughts, the one drawback is that if you were to think skillful thoughts for a whole day and night, it would get you tired. So the mind needs to rest.

This is where he recommended resting in concentration. You seclude the mind from sensuality, you pull it away from your desire for sensual pleasures, you seclude it from unskillful mental qualities, and you focus it on one of the four establishings of mindfulness. Those, the Canon says, are the proper topics of concentration, right concentration. You can focus on the body in and of itself, like the breath, or feelings in and of themselves, mind states in and of themselves, or mental qualities in and of themselves.

The easiest one to focus on is the body in and of itself. You stay with the breath. Any thoughts of sensuality that come up, any desires for sensual pleasures, or any fascination with those desires, you have to learn to hold them in check. And for our purposes right now, any thought that pulls you away from the breath counts as unskillful. Even it has to do with your responsibilities, even it has to do with your social requirements, social duties, your duties for to the monastery, your duties at home, your duties with family whatever, put it aside. Just stay with the body in and of itself.

What this means is that you're not concerned about the body in the world. The body in the world would be concerned with questions of how good-looking it is or how strong it is to do the work you need it to do, how healthy it is. You put those issues aside. Just notice what the sensation of having a body is, right here, right now. That, as the Buddha pointed out, can help cut away all those other issues.

When you keep those other issues away and have just the sensation of the breath coming in, going out, then you focus on how long it is or how short it is. Then you're aware of the whole body as you breathe in, the whole body as you breathe out. A sense of full-body awareness helps keep you planted firmly in the present moment. If your focus is too small, it's very easy to slip off into the past, slip off into the future, or slip off into what Ajaan Lee called delusion concentration, where the mind is still but it's got a very limited sense of where it is. You come out of delusion concentration and say, "Where was I? What was I focused on?" Not anything in the body, not anything you could really put your finger on. It's pleasant. It's nice. But it's delusion concentration.

To stay firmly planted in the present moment, it's good to establish full-body awareness. It's as if you nail your hands down in your hands, nail your feet down

in your feet. You can't move. But it's not that you're nailed down in the sense that it's going to be painful. It's actually very pleasant. The breath can come in and go out in a way that feels really good, really energizing. Then you can spread your awareness to fill the whole body. There's a sense of the whole body breathing in, the whole body breathing out. As for any other thoughts that come nibbling at the edge of your awareness, you don't have to pay them any attention. Keep telling yourself, "This is important. You need this. This is strengthening to the mind, being able to find a sense of well-being, a sense of pleasure, rapture or pleasure and refreshment, just by being with the breath." You don't have to buy it. You don't have to ask for anything from anyone else. It's a strength, an energizing process that comes from within. It doesn't require you to take anything away from anyone else. This is why the Buddha said that this pleasure is blameless.

As for whatever sense of ease and refreshment, pleasure or rapture you feel, just allow that to be kneaded through the body. The image the Buddha gave is of a bathman. Back in those days, a bathman would take a pile of bath powder and then knead water into it, the same way that we would knead water into flour to make bread. You want to knead it all the way through to make sure the whole pile of bath powder is moistened. So wherever there's a sense of pleasure, just think of it radiating out from that spot or flowing through the energy channels in the body, dissolving patterns of tension, so that it saturates everything. You can think of it getting into your bloodstream and going everywhere that the blood vessels go in your body: through your head, down your shoulders, throughout the torso, through your legs, out to the tips of your toes, the tips of your fingers, everywhere. Think of it flowing around. Then just allow that awareness to stay in that state. It's a delicate balance.

The Thai word Ajaan Fuang used is *prakhawng*, which means you hold it very gently but steadily. It's the word they use when, say, a child is learning how to walk, and you hold the child, with your hands maybe an inch away from the child, so that the child can walk on its own without your grabbing it. If you grab it, the child isn't going to learn how to walk properly. But if your hands are too far away, the child could easily fall and you wouldn't be ready to catch it.

In the same way, try to hold that sense of full body awareness here in the present moment. Don't let it fall into the past. Don't let it fall back into the future. Very gently make sure that it just stays right here. If any thought pops up and says, "Oh, I've got to think about this. Got to think about that," you can say, "No, not right now. The mind needs to be strengthened."

A common image in the forest tradition is of a knife that needs to be sharpened. Sharpening a knife takes a long time. Over there in the forest

monasteries, they don't have electric knife sharpeners. They have a big stone and some water. You wet the stone and run the knife over the stone. You have to be very careful to apply steady pressure on the knife. Don't add more pressure. Don't let the pressure up because then you would spoil the blade. There has to be very steady pressure, as you work and work and work and work, up and down the blade, along the knife, keeping it on the stone. Just be very steady for a long period of time. When you're done, you have a very sharp knife, a knife that can be used to cut through anything. If you were to keep using it without sharpening it like this, after a while it would get dull. Then you wouldn't be able to use it to cut through anything at all.

In the same way, your mind needs to be sharpened. If you want to deal with issues in your life that need a lot of thinking, well, get the mind sharpened first and then think about them.

Another image that's common in the Canon is based on the word *jhāna*, which is related to the verb, *jhāyati*, the verb that they use for a very steady flame. They have different words for burning in Pali, and *jhāyati* is used specifically for the flame of an oil lamp, which burns very steadily—so steadily that you can read by it, unlike the flames of a fire in the fireplace, which flicker around and are too unsteady to really read by properly. Ajaan Lee's image would be of a Coleman lantern. The breath sends ease and rapture filling the body through all the little blood vessels in your body, all the little nerves. He said it's like the light that bathes the mantle of a Coleman lantern. Everything is very still but every thread is glowing, energized. Again, it's the kind of light that you can read by.

So you start with the breath, get a sense of pleasure coming from the breath, and then think of the breath energy suffusing whole body. You don't drop the breath to go for the pleasure. Stay with the idea that breath energy can fill all your nerves, can fill all your blood vessels. If there's a sense of ease or rapture, pleasure or refreshment, any pleasant sensation anywhere in the body, allow it to spread around the body. Think of it going with the blood, going with the nerves, so that your sense your body is like that mantle of the Coleman lantern. Everything is suffused with a sense of energy and well-being.

And then just maintain that. Think of word *prakhawng*: You're holding it the way you would very gently hold a child learning to walk, realizing that he could slip and lose balance at any time so you have to be there to watch over him. But you don't grab hold of his hand too tight. When part of the mind asks, "How much longer are you going to do this?" you say, "As long as I need to."

We've got a whole hour, and it's not bad to be sitting here very still for a whole hour. You're not being irresponsible. You're not being antisocial. You're not

being selfish. The mind is healed by this kind of awareness, and when it's healed, then whatever work it eventually does have to do, it'll do with a lot more strength, with a greater sense of well-being. It's much more likely to do it skillfully.

So take this chance to let the ragged edges of the mind get healed and smoothed over. Any wounds in the mind, let them heal—because this is a gift not only to yourself but also to everybody around you.