

The Inner Monitor

July 18, 2009

Ajaan Lee used to like to say that as you meditate, you're developing three qualities or treasures in the mind. He uses the Thai word *sombat*, which means treasure. First you've got the breath, which is the object treasure. In other words, it's the right object to settle on, because it's very close to the mind. And among all bodily functions, it's the one most responsive to your direction. You can think about making the breath more comfortable, more refreshing, and it responds. Think about making it longer, shorter, deeper or more shallow. It'll respond.

Then you try to develop the second treasure, which is the quality treasure, quality in the sense of well-being that comes from staying with the breath. The well-being here is both a sense of physical ease and a sense of stillness in the mind. The mind has a place where it can move in, settle down, put down roots, isn't forced to wander all the time. So the quality we're working for here is a sense of well-being both in body and mind.

Underlying all this is the intention treasure, the treasure of good intentions, skillful intentions. Here the intention is to keep the breath in mind and to keep it comfortable, to keep the mind at ease and keep it focused.

Now, to maintain this intention requires three other mental qualities. The first is mindfulness, the ability keep something in mind. Then there's alertness which watches over what you're doing. And then there's ardency, which is the effort to do it skillfully. You want all these three things to be working together.

Alertness is probably the most important here. You keep monitoring how things are going. On the one hand, you monitor how the breath is going to see if it needs any changes. On the other, you monitor how your mind is going, to see if it's wandered off, to see if it's really settled in—basically evaluating the situation so that you can decide what to do.

This is the quality that's in charge of everything. If you can't keep watching over your mind, can't continue to monitor your own mind, there's no way you can train it. There's no way you can develop any of these qualities. You slip off the breath and you don't even know. We've all had this kind of experience. What happened to the monitor? It got shut off. Or it got kidnapped. It was taken over by somebody else, i.e., another intention.

So it's important you have this monitor really solid and really strong, very conscious of what it's doing, very mindful of what it should be doing—not only for the meditation to work, but also as you develop in the meditation. Then you

can use this quality in the rest of your life, because the troubles that come up in the mind don't come up only while you're meditating. They can come up at any time. And as well all know, the biggest dangers in life lie not outside but inside—the harm that our own mind can do to us when it's not well monitored.

This may sound confining, the idea of having a monitor watching all the time, but we're already monitored. The problem is that we have many different monitors, with lots of different agendas. With some of the monitors, if we actually sat down and talked with them, we would agree with what their values are, what their intentions are. But with some of the monitors there are things that on reflection you couldn't agree with, yet they do take over. You suddenly find yourself running with a particular emotion or idea that is totally crazy, totally against your own best interest, as if you'd been hijacked.

So be especially careful as you meditate. Keep your meditation monitor watching very assiduously, very constantly, very carefully with a lot of sensitivity. And get used to having a sense of the monitor being on your side, i.e., providing you with a sense of well-being right here right now.

This is one of the reasons why some of the stricter monitors get overthrown, because they tend to be too harsh, insensitive. They may be right, but they go about it in the wrong way. You want a monitor who's wise and has a sense of physical well-being on its side. You notice this as emotions come into the mind, strong emotions: greed, fear, anger, jealousy, whatever. They can very quickly overthrow any intelligent monitor, and they've got the body on their side. The emotion arises and it's got hormones to go along with it that have an effect in the body. They seem very, very real because that effect in the body is much stronger than any voice of reason might be. But it's a mistake to think that it's emotion versus reason. After all, each emotion has its reasons. You have your reasons for being angry. You have reasons for being fearful or jealous, and you can justify them to your selves here—because you have many selves.

What you want is something with better reasons but can also get the body on its side, too. This is why we spend so much time getting the breath to be easeful, taking that sense of well-being, trying to make it go straight to the heart, really gratifying, to find which area of the body is most sensitive to comfortable breathing or seems most in need of good breath energy. Usually it's around the heart, maybe in the throat. In Zen, they talk about your core being lower down—that might be your core. But for lot of people, the core is around the throat and the heart and the chest, whichever part of the body is most responsive to different ways of breathing and seems most gratified when you find a rhythm that's just right. When you find that sense of well-being, think of it spreading out, saturating

the rest of the body, permeating the rest of the body. Once you've gained a sense of it, try to be able to tune in to it as quickly as you can, so that you can have it whenever you need it.

There's a common tendency when we meditate that we think we've got a whole hour to get the mind to settle down, so in the beginning when it hasn't quite settled down, you say, "Well it's normal. It's going to take a little while." But it doesn't have to. This is why sometimes it's good to have little five-minute meditation breaks every now and then, when you realize that if you're going to get anything out of the break, you've got to settle down immediately, find that sense of well-being, and it's there. You can tap into it. Once you've recognized it, once you've discovered it, it's always there for you to tap into. So try to tap into it as quickly as you can during longer meditations, too, because there are times when you're going to need it immediately.

That way, when a strong emotion comes up with its reasons, your better reasoning faculties can also have a quick bodily ally. Say, for instance, that anger arises. It's going to have its reasons for being angry. You'll notice that your heartbeat changes. There's a sense of tension, say, in the chest or right around the stomach, and it's very insistent. We've learned to interpret those feelings as a need to get the anger out of our system. But part of us may also know that if we get it out of our system, it's going to cause a lot of trouble, so we bottle it up. But that doesn't help either. So you want to tap into your good breath energy and use that as your foundation to disperse the physical side of the anger, so that your more skillful monitor can then be in a better position to reason with the anger.

There's always a part of the mind that's monitoring what's going on. Once anger arises, for instance, there's a part of the mind that makes a decision: "Shall I continue with this anger, or is it really stupid?" And no matter how much our more reasonable side say it's really stupid, the other side will have its reasons, too. You suddenly find yourself going with them. The monitor has been kidnapped, hijacked, because the other side seems stronger. Its reasons seemed very reasonable.

Actually, several things have happened. One is that your mindfulness has lapsed. It's as if you've gone unconscious for a moment, and you've woken up in another mindset, where your qualities of conscience have been momentarily blinded. You've got blindfolds on. The voice of wiser, more sage counsel in your mind has been pushed off to the side as totally irrelevant. "That's just reason," you say to yourself, "but I've got a stronger desire here." And the desire will have its reasons, too.

As you catch this happening, you need something to work against that. So you get the breath energy in the body to help counteract the pull of the anger and then think of that good breath energy working through the tension of the anger, dissolving it away, so that you have a more level playing field. Then you can look at the actual reasons for the anger. Sometimes it'll be stubborn and will refuse to present its reasons to the full light of day. But if you're insistent enough, they'll come to the surface. Then you're in a better position to understand the anger for where it's coming from, to see where its appeal was, and to realize that you don't really want to go there. And you can see that there are alternative ways of dealing with the situation.

The same with fear: It's interesting that in the Buddha's list of unskillful emotions, fear doesn't show up. There is a passage where he talks about fear as being a basis for biased or prejudiced action, unfair action, out of fear that you're afraid to confront certain powers and so you go along with them. But that kind of fear is usually related to greed, anger, delusion of some kind. Those are the unskillful emotions. So when fear arises, you have to ask in some cases, is it a reasonable fear or is it an unreasonable fear? If it's tainted with greed, anger, or delusion, those are things you've got to deal with. After all, the fear of acting in unskillful ways is a fear you actually want to listen to. Fear of harming yourself, fear of harming others: That's something you really want to listen to. So the fear in and of itself is not bad. It's when it is unreasonable, when it's blind: That's the part of the fear that you have to deal with.

So again, you try to tap into the breath and tap into that part of the mind that observes. Once the breath has gotten through some of the physical side of the fear, you're in a better position to actually look at the fear as an event in the mind.

There's the story of Ajaan Khao, who was staying in a cave one time. His schedule was such that he didn't realize that there was also a tiger staying in the cave, because the tiger had its schedule, too. It had certain times of the day that it would go out to feed, certain times it would come back into the cave. It was deeper into the cave, and it just so happened that its time for leaving and entering the cave were the times when Ajaan Khao happened to be away from the cave.

Until one night. It was a full moon night. He was out doing walking meditation in front of the cave, and the tiger happened to come back. Ajaan Khao's first reaction was abject fear: There was a tiger come walking right toward him. But he had the good sense to think, "Hey, wait a minute, the tiger is much less dangerous to me than my fear is. My fear can make me do all sorts of horrible things if I don't watch out. So this is a good time to observe the fear." So that

inner monitor, the one that was watching, directed him to just watching the fear. “What is this fear? Where does it come from? Watch it as an event in the mind.”

As he watched it and pursued it, his mind went into very deep concentration as he tried to see, “When is this fear really worth listening to? Why does it have so much power over the mind? Let’s just watch it come. Why is it coming?” He watched, watched, watched, until the fear left him. He went into such deep concentration that he lost track of his body. When he finally came out of concentration, it was a long time afterward. He could tell because the moon had moved quite a way in the sky. But tiger was gone. The tiger felt no sense of threat from him as he was standing there watching his own mind. So he came out of the experience not only alive, but also with a lot more understanding.

And a mind that felt a lot more free.

This is the problem with these emotions. They seem to tell us all kinds of good things we should be doing—good from their point of view. But they enslave us. They push us around. As we see all around us, the power of greed, aversion, and delusion can cause all kinds of harm, not the least harm being to the person who gives in to them. Yet when that person has to suffer the consequences of the greed, aversion, and delusion, they’re gone. They’re like unreliable friends. They get you to do something against the law, but then as soon as the police come, they run off, leaving you holding the bag. So you’ve got to realize that these things are not your friends. We tend to indulge in these emotions because part of us finds that there’s an advantage to it. Many of our monitors are very easily taken over by them, converted to their side.

Just like politicians, our desires have all kinds of propaganda tricks, so your wiser monitor needs tricks as well. This is why we not only work on making mindfulness and alertness more continuous. This quality of ardency means not just that you’re skillful with the breath, but that you’re also skillful in using the breath, learning how to associate this calm wise observer, this calm wise monitor, with a sense of physical ease and well-being. That association is important. You want to strengthen it as much you can, so that when you’re using good reasons against the bad reasons of your destructive emotions, it’s not simply reason versus your rebellious body. It’s good reason that has learned to get the body on its side.

So as you meditate, try to develop this quality of the skillful monitor, the observer watching things, evaluating them. When something comes up, learn how to quickly evaluate whether it’s helpful in the meditation or not, especially in the early stages. Whatever comes up that’s not related to the breath, you say, “Not now, this is not the time or place for that.” You get used to being able to drop a thought wherever you are in the thought, so that you can get back to the breath.

As the skills develop, you can start admitting the thoughts into the range of your awareness so that you can observe them, understand the pull of each particular thought, what are its advantages, what are its drawbacks.

And if, in the course of that, you find yourself getting pulled into the thought, you've got your skill in learning how to drop off in mid-sentence, regardless of how entangled you've been. You just learn to say, no, drop it and get back to the comfortable breathing.

One of your tricks should be that, once you've dropped a thought and gotten back to the breath, you give yourself a couple of really good gratifying breaths to reward yourself for coming back, so that your monitor can have more allies, a sense of well-being, a sense of fullness, a sense of being at home with a peaceful state in the body and the mind. That monitor can be strengthened, and you can change your understandings. It's not reason versus emotion. It's good reasons with good emotions versus bad emotions with bad reasons. When you see the playing field in that way, it's a lot easier and easier for the good side to win.