

In the Mood

October 20, 2011

When you meditate, you've got to put the mind in the right mood. And sometimes focusing on the breath is the way to put it in the right mood. You take a couple of long, deep, in-and-out breaths, and it feels good. You can just feel the stress and the strain melting away. The patterns of tension you've been holding in your body can begin to dissolve. And there's a sense of nourishment that comes from that. So you just drink it in. If, after a while, long breathing doesn't feel good, you can try other rhythms: short in, long out; long in, short out; or shorter breathing, more shallow, lighter, heavier. You get to explore this area of what they call form: the way you feel the body from within. And sometimes that's enough to get the mind to settle down.

Other times, you need to think about other things first in order to get into the right mood to stay with the breath. The Buddha talks about gladdening the mind, steadying the mind, and releasing the mind. And these are ways of taking a mind that's a little bit out of balance and bringing it back into balance. They're for taking a mind that doesn't feel like meditating, and refuses to stay with the breath, and get it so that it's more willing, so that it finally decides that, yes, it really does want to stay with the breath.

After all, this element of desire is an important part of the meditation. It's an important part of the practice, an essential element in right effort. It's not the case that the Buddha described all desire as bad. The desire to develop the right factors of the path and to abandon the wrong factors: That's actually part of the path itself. So a good way to get the mind willing and happy to settle down with the breath is to look at the mind and see what it needs.

Sometimes it needs gladdening. In other words, you have to raise your energy level. Look at the positive side of meditating. This is one of the reasons why we have those chants on goodwill before we meditate. You realize that when you meditate, you really are showing goodwill to yourself, and at the same time you're showing goodwill to others. You're looking for a form of happiness that doesn't take anything away from anyone else.

At the same time, you're looking for a form of happiness that you can depend on, because it doesn't have to depend on anyone else. It comes from your own inner resources. And that form of happiness is a special sense of security. It's like knowing you have plenty of food stored away, plenty of water, all the things you

need. That's a lot better than having to depend on people outside, or things outside being a certain way.

Because when we look at the world, we can see that it very rarely stays a certain way. Sometimes there's too much rain, sometimes not enough rain, sometimes there are huge fires and earthquakes. Right now there are floods in Thailand. And we're sitting up here on the mountain thinking, "Well, at least we're not going to get flooded." But we do have fires here, we do have earthquakes. No matter where you look in the world, there's always natural danger.

Then of course there are the dangers that come from a mind that hasn't been trained. As we're working on training the mind here, we're finding a source of happiness that doesn't have to be touched by things outside. It doesn't have to depend on things outside. We're a lot more secure. And as you develop this happiness, it's not a selfish thing. You find that you have more to share with others. You have more strength to give.

So these are some ways of gladdening the mind, so that you see the positive side of the meditation.

Then there's the process of steadying the mind. That has more to do with seeing the negative results of *not* meditating. In other words, you realize that if you let the mind wander outside, you're wandering in dangerous territory. The Buddha gives the image of a monkey going into an area where the human beings are, and it turns out that the human beings have set out traps for the monkeys. They put out little patches of tar, the monkey gets stuck on the tar, and it can't get away. There's also the story of the quail that wanders away from its normal territory, which is a field where clods of earth and stones have been plowed up, where it can hide from hawks. Well, it wanders away to an area that hasn't been plowed and, sure enough, a hawk swoops down and gets it.

So those are the dangers of not staying with your frame of reference, which right now is the body in and of itself, the breath coming in, going out. You think of all the trouble you can get yourself into if you don't train your mind.

For instance, think about the pleasures you'd like to enjoy. Ajaan Fuang once commented that the pleasures you're really going for, especially the sensual pleasures, the ones that really have a strong impact on you: Why do they have that impact? It's because you had them in the past, and you want them back. In other words, whether it was in this lifetime or another lifetime, there's something inside you that really gets drawn to things you used to have. But, of course, what does that mean? That you're going to lose them again, and you're going to hunger for them again. It goes around and around and around. And you know the kind of

stupid, and crazy, and harmful things you can do sometimes under the influence of that kind of desire. This kind of thinking is chastening.

Like the chant that we had just now: The world is swept away, it does not endure, it offers no shelter, there's no one in charge, the world has nothing of its own, one has to pass on leaving everything behind, it's insufficient, insatiable, a slave to craving. It's full of inconstancy, stress, pain, not-self. And craving keeps driving you back to these things again and again and again. There's never a sense of enough.

There's that story of the king in the Canon who was curious: What does it mean, the world is a slave to craving? The monk who's teaching him says, "Suppose someone came from the east and said, 'There's a kingdom to the east full of all kinds of treasures, all kinds of wealth. It's prosperous but it's army is weak, and you could conquer it if you wanted to.' Would you conquer it?" And here the king, who was 80 years old already, said, "Sure. I'd try to conquer it, rule it."

"Then suppose another man came from the south, saying that there's another kingdom like that to the south. And as it turns out, there's another man from the west, and one from the north, all saying the same thing. Would you try to conquer those kingdoms as well?" "Of course." "Suppose someone were to come from the other side of the ocean saying, 'There's a kingdom on other side of the ocean you could conquer.'" And the king said he'd for that one, too. In other words, the mind has no sense of enough when it comes to sensual pleasures, when it comes to power. Because there never really is enough. None of that stuff is secure.

There's another story of a former king who had become a monk and would go sit under a tree, exclaiming, "What bliss! What bliss!" And the other monks were concerned that he was missing his pleasures as a king. So they go and inform the Buddha, and the Buddha asks for the monk to come and see him. The Buddha asks him, "What do you have in mind when you're saying this?" And the monk says, "Back when I was a king, even though I had guards posted inside and outside the palace, inside and outside the city, inside and outside the countryside, still at night I couldn't sleep for fear that someone would come and take my life, take my power away. But now I can sit under a tree, my needs met, and I have no fear of any danger from any direction at all." In other words, the happiness of power and wealth has no safety at all. So when your mind is prowling around in those kinds of thoughts, you have to realize you're in unsafe territory.

That kind of thought is chastening. It gives rise to what the Buddha calls *samvega*, which literally means terror. But it also can mean a sense of dismay over how futile those kinds of pleasures are—how that kind of thinking that goes after

those pleasures is just going to get you into a lot of trouble. That realization helps to steady the mind.

So you realize there's nowhere else you want to go, you want to stay right here. Ajaan MahaBoowa compares these teachings to a stick you use to train a monkey. As soon as the monkey reaches for something, you hit it with a stick. In the same way, you hit the mind with these teachings so that as soon as it wanders away from the breath, bang! you realize you're looking for trouble, and you come right back.

So in this way you look at the positive side of how good it is to meditate, and you look at the negative side of how bad your life can get if you don't meditate. They've done studies of people who develop skills, and they've discovered that the ones that are really proficient at particular skills are the ones who, on the one hand, really take to heart the benefits of developing that skill, and on the other, are very alert to the dangers of not developing it, the harm you could do.

Years back, we were sitting on a plane, and two knee surgeons were sitting in the seats in front of us. They had just come from a conference. There was an older surgeon and a younger one. The younger one had just recently graduated from school, and his attitude was, "Well, I've learned all I really need in order to take care of me for the rest of my life. I really don't need to learn much more." And the older one said, "No, you can't think like that at all. There are always advances, and there are so many things you can do wrong to people's knees if you don't really take care and do your best." The younger one didn't seem to be receptive. And I kept thinking: "Keep me away from that surgeon." People who don't realize the harm they can do to themselves and to other people are really dangerous.

So these are ways that you gladden the mind, realizing that the meditation really does provide a way out, and it's a good way out, too. It's not filled with thorns and brambles. It's a good path; you get to sit here and focus on your breath, to work with the breath energy in the body so that it nourishes the body along with the mind, so that the mind has a greater sense of well-being. Even as you're on the way, even though you haven't reached the end yet, you can still develop a very strong sense of well-being just being on the path.

Then you steady the mind by realizing that if you wander off the path, even a little bit, the hawk can come and get you. These cravings of yours that wander away can keep you going without end.

So when you can develop both of these attitudes, you find that it's a lot easier to stay with the breath. And the more consistently you can stay with the breath, being observant about what you're doing, then more momentum you build up in the path. It's not just a series of starts and stops, starts and stops. It becomes more continuous. It flows. So try to keep these right attitudes in mind.