

Full Attention

December 29, 2011

Ajaan Suwat used to call this place our quiet corner here. We're literally at the end of the road. Our neighbors are mainly coyotes, bobcats, a few overly friendly dogs, and just a few other people here. It's a great place for physical seclusion. You sit out under the trees and you open your eyes, and there are no human beings around at all.

You want to use the physical seclusion to bring about a state of mental seclusion as well. Because for most of us, if you took a picture of the baggage we brought here, we'd be surrounded. Issues of the family, issues at work, all the issues that we tend to talk to ourselves about, if they were actual bags, would be piled so high you couldn't see past them.

You want to learn how to cast those away. Remind yourself that whatever issue may come up in life, you're going to need mindfulness, you're going to need alertness, along with good powers of concentration and discernment. So the responsible thing right now is to let go of all your other responsibilities and work on these qualities. The future is very uncertain, but what *is* certain is that you're going to need a trained mind in order to deal with it.

So if you find yourself chattering to yourself about this, that, or the other thing, remind yourself that's not what you're here for. And no matter how important or pressing the issue may be, the training of the mind is more important and more pressing.

We try to work on what the Buddha said is our ancestral ground" the body in and of itself, feelings in and of themselves, mind in and of itself, mental qualities in and of themselves. In other words, stay with just what you've got here right now on its own terms—not the body in the world, or the feelings in the world—and try to keep your thoughts within that space. If you find yourself chattering to yourself about things outside of this space, remember what happens to the quail or the monkeys that go away from their own ancestral territories: They get caught. The quail gets caught by the hawk; the monkey gets caught by human beings.

In other words, the mind doesn't have a chance to develop its independence, to develop its own well-being, to look after itself. So as soon as you find your mind wandering off to these things, come right back. This is where the real work is right now.

Of course, a very good way of making the present moment attractive is to try to keep it as comfortable as possible. When you work with the breath, don't let it

get mechanical. Try to be sensitive, really, really sensitive to each breath as it comes in, each breath as it goes out. Try to notice where in the body you're most sensitive to the variations of the breath. For some people, it's the area in the chest. For others, it's in the throat or around the neck. Especially if you've been trying to spread breath energy around the different parts of the body, there's a tendency to squeeze off the most obvious parts so that you can pay attention to the less obvious parts, and that's not helpful. Work with the most obvious parts first and be really sensitive to them. What quality of breathing do you need? How long, how wide? How much do you want to push the breath into different parts of the body, and to what point does the pushing become counterproductive?

Try to take each breath on its own terms. And remember that what you're doing here is healing both for the body and for the mind. When your nerves feel frazzled, allowing comfortable breath energy to flow through the nerves is one of the best things you can do for them. Ajaan Lee calls this the cool fire of jhana, the cool fire of concentration. Hot fire, of course, covers all the issues you deal with that come in through the eyes, ears, nose, tongue, body, thoughts about past and future. As those things go through your nerves, they're like a hot fire. They can fry your nerves, whereas the cool fire of jhana cools things down, gives them energy: a cooling energy, a nourishing energy. The more you can give the present moment your full, cool attention, the more healing it's going to be.

Which is another good reason you want to cut off any thoughts that would pull you away from really being attentive to right here, right now. Even thoughts about how much longer the meditation is going to last: Just drop them. Good thoughts, bad thoughts, indifferent thoughts: Just let them go. Try to be really, really sensitive to the feeling of the breath right here.

That way, you've got all four frames of reference in one place. The breath, of course, is the body. The sense of ease and well-being and fullness that you can work with through the breath, that's feeling. The mind state that stays focused here, that's the mind. And then, of course, there's the mental quality of mindfulness, along with all the other factors for awakening. The thinking here is the thinking that tries to analyze how well all this is going. You make adjustments and then you evaluate how well it feels. If you sense that it would be good to experiment a little bit here or there, well, go ahead and do that. This way, you've got analysis of qualities, one of the factors for awakening right here. All the factors for awakening are right here, but you don't have to analyze the different qualities to figure out which is which. Just bring them all together for the time being. Make them one.

Give this your full attention because it *deserves* your full attention. The well-being of the mind, the well-being of the body in the present moment: This is your foundation. All the good things we want out of life have to come out of the well-being of the mind. If you start getting frazzled, feeling overwhelmed by events, the mind starts flailing around, and you're going to end up doing things and saying things that you later regret—things that are not helpful for yourself or for anyone else. This is why meditation is not a selfish thing. It's a gift to yourself and to the people you live with.

So give it your full attention so that you can do it really well. Don't let things get put on automatic pilot. As soon as the breath is on automatic pilot, the mind will start wandering off again. So each breath deserves your full attention.

This quality of attention is one of the bases of success, or the bases of power—*iddhipada* as it's called in Pali. This is what gives strength to the meditation because it gathers in all your awareness, all your alertness, and brings it right here. And when everything is fully alert right here, you can begin to sense connections you may not have seen before.

When the Buddha talks about meditation, he doesn't divide it between tranquility and insight, or concentration and discernment. These things all develop together right here because you're giving the meditation your full attention. Your full attention is what makes the mind still and allows you to see things clearly. When you see there's an unskillful connection, you can just let it drop. So don't worry about dividing things up. Try to bring everything together, make it as one as possible, because it's out of the oneness that all good things grow. It's what gives extra value to the mind.

It's like going down to the market and discovering there's only one of a particular fruit that you want. You can imagine how much it might cost, as opposed to having hundreds and hundreds of them overflowing the counters, in which case they'd be practically giving them away. If you want to give value to the mind, you make it one. And then from that sense of oneness, all the good things spread out for yourself, for the people around you, the people you're responsible for, the people you encounter. If you keep your priorities straight like this, everybody benefits.