

Recovering Your Balance

October 12, 2012

Sometimes you come to the meditation really eager to meditate, and other times you just drag yourself here. But it's important that you do the meditation every day, every day. As the ajaans often say, when you're in the mood to meditate, you meditate. When you're not in the mood to meditate, you meditate. You realize that it's a necessary thing to do.

It's really amazing in our culture, where so many things are required, that meditation is regarded as optional, something for people who have the time or the inclination. But it's really something we all need for our well-being. If we don't train the mind, the mind can easily turn around and destroy itself.

That's what the teaching on suffering is all about. If suffering were just something that happened to us because of things outside—if conditions outside are bad, so we suffer, and if conditions are good, we don't—then the issue wouldn't be inside. The issue would be outside. The thing is, when conditions are bad, we can suffer. When conditions are good, we can still suffer. When we see that, we sometimes get pulled down into a whirlpool. It just goes deeper and deeper. So you have to pull yourself out. Fortunately, you don't have to pull anything. You've just got to let the whirlpool go.

Right here with the breath, you're not asked too much. Just be here with the breath. It's your lifeline. And what you do with the breath is totally up to you right now.

It's amazing how the mind can take a really simple instruction like this and create a lot of suffering around it, too. I remember when I was with Ajaan Fuang very early on, he told me one time, "Your only duty all day long is just to watch your breath." It sounded oppressive. I had a duty that I had to do all day long. What he was actually trying to tell me that nothing else was required of me, at least at that point. His message was just meant to give me a sense of lightness, a sense of freedom, but I was able to make it into a message of oppression.

It's the same way in working with the breath. Sometimes you don't have the energy to work with the breath, or things don't seem to be going well. Just be with the breath. Do what you want with the breath. Learn to talk to yourself as you meditate in any way that gives you a sense of freedom. You can play with the breath if you want, and you don't have to play with it if you don't want. Or if you find the mind isn't willing to stay with the breath, find some topic you do find

inspiring. Think about the goodness of your generosity, the goodness of your virtue. You can think about the Buddha, the Dhamma, or the Sangha.

One of the really fine things about Buddhism is that it was founded by someone who knows what it's like to make a mistake. Even in his last lifetime, the Buddha made a huge mistake—six years of tormenting himself. And all those previous lifetimes! You look in the Jātaka stories and it's not as if the Buddha was always perfect. He was making mistakes and having to learn from them. So unlike a religion that's supposedly founded by a God who's never been a human being, who's never had to admit a mistake, the Buddha knows what it's like to make a mistake and to have to pick yourself up, dust yourself off, and move on.

Those instructions he gave to Rāhula are really useful in this regard. He said that if you see you've made a mistake, admit the mistake, talk it over with someone else, and then simply resolve not to repeat that mistake. You don't have to carry the guilt around with you, just the memory that that was a mistake. Then you move on.

The Buddha gave similar instructions to a village headman. If you see you've made a mistake, realize that remorse is not going to go back and undo the mistake, so sitting around with remorse is not going to help. Recognize that was a mistake. Decide that you're not going to do that ever again, and then develop lots of goodwill—goodwill for yourself, goodwill for everybody. The goodwill for yourself is a reminder not to torment yourself needlessly. The goodwill for everybody else is to firm up that resolve that you're not going to do anything to harm other people.

So try to keep these attitudes in mind, because as we meditate, we're going to be learning from our mistakes. We're going to see our mistakes. After all, what are craving and clinging but mistakes? Ignorance is a mistake. We're all coming from mistakes. We've begun to realize that and recognize the mistakes as such. That's where there's hope for us. It's when people refuse to recognize their mistakes that there's no hope at all. Ajaan Fuang had a student one time who would never admit—ever, ever, ever—to having made a mistake. His comment about her was that she was the sort of person whose farts don't smell. There is no such person in the world, but people like to pretend.

So when you look at meditation and things aren't going well, remind yourself: At least you're better than someone who doesn't recognize that the problem is with the mind. You realize there's work to be done, and you've got some sense of where and how to do it. That's a beginning right there. You may not like to be right back at the beginning, but oftentimes that's what happens. As you meditate, you find yourself making progress, and then all of a sudden, zoom! You're back where you started.

There's a little doll they have in Japan that, when you throw it on the ground, will tip over, and then it'll right itself. They use it as training for children. "See? The doll falls over and then it picks itself back up." So you see you've made a mistake? Be like the doll. Regain your balance. Stop and take stock of things. Try to see where your thinking has been harmful to yourself, where you've been deluding yourself, getting involved in ways of thinking that are really off-balance. You recognize then, that that kind of thinking is that kind of thinking, but your awareness is something else.

The Buddha has that statement about the mind being luminous but darkened by visiting defilements. He said this is the fact that allows us to train the mind. Now, he's not saying that the mind is naturally good. He's just saying that it's bright, which means that when the defilements come, they're like clouds blocking the sun. When the clouds move away, the sun hasn't been stained by them. That awareness is still there. Good, bad, indifferent: The awareness is there. You try to focus in on that, just to be aware of what's going on, seeing what's going on, so that you can understand it. If you don't understand it, watch it. Have some patience. Whatever comes up, just watch, watch, watch until you see something that interests you. Then focus in on that.

In other words, watch the mind in action. You can watch it as it's staying with the breath. Watch the breath. Watch the feelings. Those four frames of reference are all right here. You've got the breath, which is the body. You've got the feelings associated with the breath. You've got the mind state that's either staying with the breath or not staying with the breath, and the mental qualities that you can use to deal with anything that's going to pull you away. They're all right here. When we try to rush through the steps and move on to the next level, and the next level, and the next level, we miss a lot of things. That leaves us right back where we started.

I had a dream one time when I first started meditating. There was a big museum with many stories and a big entrance with a large stairway that went up inside to each floor. But there was also a ladder on the side of the museum where you could go straight up to the top floor. So in the dream, I chose the ladder. But as I was getting up toward the top, the ladder fell, so I was back where I was, right at the entrance. So I said, "Okay, I didn't die. I guess I'll have to go up the stairway."

The message, of course, was that the meditation was not going to be as fast as I expected. There was a lot more to learn than just a particular technique. This is why they have the apprenticeship for the monks. It's not that we're just going to learn how to stay with the breath or learn a few stages in meditation, and

everything is going to open up, and then you can get on with the rest of your life. The training is a training in *all* of your life and *all* of your mind.

So make sure you realize it's an all-around training. The technique is central to the training, but it's not everything. It gives you some of the tools you're going to need in order to deal with other issues that come up, some of which will be issues that you like dealing with, and others of which will be issues you'd rather not, but you've got to deal with them. Whatever comes up in the mind that's going to cause any stress or any trouble in the mind, you've got to learn how to see through it. The practice may not go as fast as you like, but this is the only way.

So as you focus in on the breath, bring in whatever good qualities you know you have. As for the not-quite-so-good qualities in the mind, know that they're going to come up, too, but don't let them knock you off balance. If they do knock you off balance, you can be like that doll. Just regain your balance and keep on going.

This is a path that many have followed. There's a poem of Nandaka about the horse running along and then stumbling, but then it gets up and it keeps on running. We don't know what Nandaka's stumble was, but we do know that he became an arahant.

Take a lesson from people who walk on a tightrope. It's not the case that they're always perfectly balanced. You notice sometimes that it looks like they're going to lose their balance, but they've learned how to regain their balance quickly. That's what keeps them on the rope.

So the skill of recovery is one of the most important skills you're going to have as a meditator: noticing a mistake and then correcting for it right away. It's when you refuse to notice a mistake that you fall.