

## *Safety in Awareness*

*November 26, 2012*

When Ajaan Suwat was in the car accident that damaged his brain, he knew afterwards that his ability to teach was limited. So he focused all his energy on teaching what he thought was really important. The theme he kept returning to again and again and again was the theme of refuge: that it's through our path of practice that the mind really does find a safe place.

He, of course, had had his body all battered up, paralyzed from the base of his spine on down, yet there was something inside there, he said, that didn't change. That was so important—and the fact that it was a genuinely safe spot—that he kept stressing this over and over again. There's something here in the mind that really is reliable, something you can touch in the mind that's reliable.

That's why we're here. That's why we put so much effort in the practice, because there are so many things out there in the world and so many other things in our own minds that seem promising and then let you down. It's good to have the testimony of the Buddha and his noble disciples that it really is possible, through our own efforts, to find something that's reliable and dependable: the happiness that doesn't have to depend on conditions.

Now, we have to do conditioned things in order to get there, in the same way that we have to follow a road to a mountain, even though the road doesn't cause the mountain. Even our walking there doesn't cause the mountain, but it gets us to the mountain that's already there. There is some safety along the way even though we may not arrive all the way there. There's some relative safety right here in the mind—the quality of concentration that we're working on.

Years back, I was reading a passage in Ajaan Maha Boowa—and this was way back toward the very beginning of my practice—and he was talking about developing insight, developing discernment. As you focus on the different aggregates and as you began to see past them, he said, then you turn on this knowing awareness in the mind. He said that you decide that you can't trust it anymore. And this was at a point when I was just beginning to learn how to trust it!

That teaching came at the wrong time for me because up until that point, I had a lot of trouble trusting my own immediate awareness, my own immediate attention to things: this quality of knowing, knowing, knowing in the mind—what knows the breath, what knows the events in the mind.

The solution, of course, is knowing that there are stages in the practice. For a large part of the practice, you have to learn how to trust this basic awareness because, in many cases, it's the only thing you have to fall back on. Especially when emotional storms are going through the mind, or events outside are really, really bad and tearing up all the hopes and expectations you'd placed on the outside world, you need something inside to fall back on. And as a relative refuge, you've got this basic awareness.

Ajaan Maha Boowa himself talks about depending on this awareness. One of the lessons he learned from Ajaan Mun, the one that he held to after Ajaan Mun's death as his one main lesson to remember, was that if any knowledge comes up in the mind that you're not sure of, just go back to the basic knowing of the mind and stay there. Don't jump to any conclusions about what you've known. Just be aware, aware, aware. And whatever it is, it's going to pass safely without your being misled by it.

Similarly, he talks about when you're on the verge of death and you meet up with pain. You have to make a distinction between the pain and the awareness that's aware of the pain, and you stay with the awareness. You pose the question: Which is going to end first, the awareness or the pain? And you can rest assured that the pain will end first; the awareness will still be there afterwards.

So there are important parts of the practice when you really do have to trust this awareness. Often it's our lack of trust in this awareness that makes it difficult for us to settle down and stay in concentration. You stay there a little bit, and then you start wondering: "Is this really concentration? Is this really the jhanas, or is there something better?" or, "What should I be doing to gain more insight?" — or whatever. You have to put those doubts aside and really have trust in this awareness.

The awareness is not going to give you all the answers, and it's not always going to point you in the right direction in the sense of giving you reliable ideas as to what to do. But it is a safe place to stay. This basic need for safety is so strong because without it, the mind can do all kinds of damage to itself. And in doing damage to itself, it opens itself up to all the damage that the world outside, starting from your body and going on out, can do to you as well.

So learn to develop some trust in this just basic awareness that's right here, aware of things. Learn how to distinguish it from the things it knows. One of the best ways to do this is to get the mind in really strong concentration. The stronger the concentration, the easier it is to separate this awareness out.

When Ajaan Fuang was teaching breath meditation, he wouldn't talk about this sense of awareness very much until you'd gotten to the point where the

breath was totally still in the body. Then he'd have you work with the elements to get them into balance. If things are too warm in the body, focus on water to cool you down. Too cool? Focus on fire to warm you up. If you're feeling too lightheaded, think of earth. Feeling too heavy? Think of the breath.

Or you can start thinking about space, because the whole purpose of getting these four elements into balance is that from there it's easy to start focusing on a sense of space—around the body, permeating the body—so that the boundary of the body begins to disappear.

When you first hit this, you'll notice that as long as you think of there being a boundary, the boundary will be there. If you stop thinking that way, the boundary won't be there. Your immediate feeling is, "Well, the boundary must still be there even though I'm not thinking about it." It's actually a doubt. You can erase that doubt. The potential for the boundary is there, but it has to be activated for it to actually be a boundary. You activate it by thinking about it.

This is where the whole concept of elements becomes very, very important. The Buddha talks about the four physical elements. He also talks about the different elements in the mind, together with the element of space and the element of consciousness itself. In every case, there's a potential there, and it's your focusing on the potential in a particular way that heightens the experience of that particular element.

So it's important to understand that when you're not focusing on those elements in a way to provoke them, as they say, then you're not experiencing them. That understanding is needed for the purpose of getting the mind to settle down and be with its direct awareness of things.

We went to so much trouble when we were kids to figure out that objects would still exist even though we weren't looking at them, but for the time being as you meditate, you want to unlearn that assumption. When you're sitting here aware of space, that's the only perception you have in mind. You're not activating the sense of the physical body. Focus on what you're directly experiencing rather than on your assumption about where things are when you're not looking at them.

That's an important distinction to make and it helps you again to develop a greater sense of trust in this direct awareness. From there, you can stay with that sense of space and try to develop it as you go through the day. As you're walking down the street or at work dealing with people, you can hold in mind that perception: just space permeating everything. Think of the atoms in all the solid objects as being just tiny, tiny bits of matter surrounded by huge gobs of space. And the space is all connected; there's no boundary to it.

From that perception, you can go directly to the awareness that's aware of this, and that becomes the object of your concentration. You learn how to trust in that. That becomes more and more your sense of home, where you belong. It comes with a very, very strong sense of oneness and of stability. Now, you don't want to go jumping to any interpretations about what this means or what kind of cosmic principle it might be. But it is an important place to stay—an important place to feel at home—because it helps you weather a lot of storms.

Whatever happens outside, it doesn't have to touch this awareness. So learn to trust in it. Eventually, you will have to start taking it apart. There's that famous passage where Ananthapindika is dying, and Ven. Sariputta goes to teach him. He says, "Let go of your awareness of the body. Let go of your awareness of feelings, perceptions, fabrication." He goes through all the five aggregates, all the elements, and all the sense bases. He finally gets to the point where he says, "You have to let go of your consciousness of consciousness. Don't let your consciousness rely on consciousness." This is the point, of course, where Ananthapindika starts crying. "All those years I was with the Buddha, and he never taught me this!" Because of that reaction, he didn't get the full benefit of the teaching.

Now, you know that eventually this consciousness has to be abandoned, that there's something beyond that. There's another consciousness—what the Buddha calls consciousness without surface—that's not a consciousness of anything at all, not even of itself. There is that. But in the meantime, it's good to learn how to trust what your direct awareness of things, because that can be a refuge when you're tempted to be pulled back into everyday narratives and into the issues that bring suffering onto the mind: the narratives of aging, the narratives of illness, death, and separation. You don't want these things to burden the mind.

This awareness that's just aware and leaves things at that is a good, safe place to stay. Learn how to settle in here. It's an important way station on the path. Or you might think of it as your mobile home that goes with you all the time you're on the path.

So even though it's true that someday you will have to start questioning this awareness so that you can find something even deeper, an even more reliable refuge, in the meantime learn how to place your trust here, because there's a lot of safety in staying here