

Jhana: Responsible Happiness

July 13, 2009

We start each session with thoughts of goodwill, reminding ourselves of why we're here, and of the fact that the happiness we're looking for here is harmless. That's what goodwill is all about: May all beings find happiness in a harmless way. Of course that means *we* need to find our happiness in a way that doesn't take anything away from anyone else. In other words, each of us has to find happiness within. That's why we're here meditating.

So the fact that you're not paying attention to anyone else right now is actually a very responsible thing, because you're pursuing a happiness that will make you less of a burden. Any happiness you try to gain otherwise is going to take something away from other people, other beings. Or if you go to the other wrong extreme of self-torture, trying to find some satisfaction out of that, you're not going to find true happiness at all, so that's not responsible, either. As we've seen many times, people go back and forth between these extremes. They can be very self-denying until finally they snap; then they head off in the other direction, getting very self-indulgent. When they see the harm of indulgence, they go back to being self-denying again, back and forth. Nothing gets accomplished this way. Both ways of looking for happiness are irresponsible. The responsible way is to come in and see what inner resources you have that can be developed into a genuine happiness within.

As the Buddha once said, your most important resource, the most important factor of the right path, is right view. In another passage he said that the most important factor is right concentration. So you need to emphasize both. Everything else draws on right view and serves right concentration. The right view here starts with what I just said: If you're going to find true happiness, it has to come from within because the sources of suffering also come from within. We suffer mentally not because of unpleasant things happening to us, but from how we shape our experience of those unpleasant things—or of pleasant things, as the case may be. Which means that we need some internal skills. That's what right concentration is for.

As you focus on the breath, try to bring your focus to a nice steady spot. Ajaan Lee's image is of a post planted at the edge of the sea. The sea rises, but the post doesn't rise with the sea. The sea ebbs, but the post doesn't go out with the sea. It stays right there. The trick here, though, is to make sure that that steady spot is comfortable. If you clamp down too hard, you're going to put too much pressure on your nerves, too much pressure on the blood vessels in that part of the body, and your concentration will have some bad side effects. It will create weird sensations in the different parts of the body as the blockage right here interrupts the blood flow and leads to problems somewhere else.

So, keeping Ajaan Lee's image in mind, allow the water to flow around the post, but keep your awareness steady with an element of interest. There's going to be something to watch here; something interesting is going to appear here, so have that element of interest to catch what's actually going on. If you find any tension or blockage building up here, think of it relaxing, dispersing, dissolving

away. And then think of the relaxation spreading out from that spot, through all the energy channels in the body, through all the nerves in the body. If it needs an escape route out of the body, think of it going out the soles of your feet and the palms of your hands.

Another image from Ajaan Lee is that meditation is like medicine. Mindfulness and alertness are the actual medicines; the quality of your attention right now is what's healing both for the body and for the mind. The breath acts as a solvent, helping the medicine to spread throughout the body. When you apply well-balanced alertness and mindfulness to any sense of blockage in the body, it helps to untangle it. The reason these blockages build up is because we're not paying attention to them. Our attention is off someplace else. And so we miss a lot of what's going on right here, right now, in the body and in all the connections between the body and the mind.

So wherever you focus on the breath in the body, keep in mind that you want the breath to be comfortable, you want the energy in that spot to be comfortable, the sense of flow to be unobstructed. And the results in the body help you to gauge how skillfully you're focusing the mind. In the beginning it's hard to tell the two apart. When there's a sense of focus, there are going to be physical symptoms around the focus. But with time you begin to see that the focus and the symptoms are separate, so that if you're focusing, say, on the nose or in the middle of the head, the sense of pressure that might build up around that focus isn't necessary.

Try to think of whatever escape routes there may be to allow that pressure to disperse a little bit so it's not so heavy, not too oppressive: out the top of the head, down the spine, out the hands, out the feet, down the front of the throat, wherever. You find where your escape routes are. Use some imagination, because we've all been developing different ways of maintaining focus in the body, using different physical symptoms as a sign that the focus is staying there, or as a reminder to stay at that spot. If some of those symptoms are unpleasant, you have to learn how to let them go and yet maintain your focus. The flow of the energy there is a good way of gauging whether you're doing this skillfully.

Once you develop that skill in being both focused and at ease at the same time—alert, attentive, interested—you see how that quality of still awareness can allow patterns of tension to dissolve away and blockages to be opened up. That's when you can bring that same quality of attention to patterns of tension in other parts of the body—around the navel, the middle of the chest, the back of the neck, wherever. Here again the steadiness and quality of your awareness is the medicine. The breath is a solvent that allows the effects of the medicine to spread through different parts of the body.

This is an important skill—learning how to stay focused in a way that's healing—because that's what the Buddha's teachings are all about: healing. That's what the four noble truths are all about. They're like a doctor's prescription. What's the illness? Where does it come from? Cure the illness by getting rid of the cause. Everything the Buddha taught was meant to be healing, a means to happiness that's blameless. So if you start feeling guilty about practicing concentration, remind yourself this is a blameless pleasure. The dangers of jhana are very minor and mild. If you get really addicted to this pleasure, you might start getting lazy in your other activities, so that's something to watch out for. And you might start getting lazy about the idea of using the

jhana to develop deeper insight. You might say, “Hey, this is good enough for me,” and just want to stay right there.

The problem, of course, is that it won’t last. If the jhana isn’t supported by right view, it begins to fall apart. If you’re not careful, it can actually strengthen wrong views. Some people hit a state of concentration and then decide, “Ah, from now on I don’t need to watch out after my actions because I’ve found the Truth, the Ground of Being,” or whatever. But the problem there is not with the concentration; the problem is with the views you bring into it, thinking that it’s going to do all the work for you, or that it’s all you need to do.

So the danger is not in having concentration; the danger is in the wrong views that you might bring to the concentration, or that might prevent you from getting into concentration. For the biggest danger is *not* having concentration. We hear so much about the dangers of concentration, but the dangers of not having it are a lot worse. If you don’t have this pleasure to tap into, you’re going to go looking for pleasure in other ways, which can often be quite harmful.

As the Buddha once said, even though you may see the drawbacks of sensual pleasures, if you don’t have the pleasure of concentration to tap into, you’re going to keep going back to your old sensual pleasures. If you go back to them with denial, that just complicates the issue. People steal, kill, have illicit sex, lie, speak divisively, speak coarsely, use intoxicants, not because of their ability to access the pleasure of concentration, but because they don’t have that ability. They go looking around for sensual pleasures. People engage in self-torment, and then they get very censorious and very strict with other people for not torturing themselves or tormenting themselves. Or as we see with a lot of Buddhist scholars, they don’t have any real concentration, so they say that concentration is self-indulgent; it’s not necessary; insight has to be strict and self-denying—and with that attitude, even the insight becomes harmful. It turns into a lot of wrong view.

So the dangers of not having concentration are much greater than the dangers of getting stuck on concentration. And again, the stuckness is not so much in the concentration itself as in your views around it. As long as you’re very clear that concentration is a path, and that it has to be combined with other factors of the path—right resolve, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, and right mindfulness—then it’s perfectly safe. This is especially true when you develop the ability to read the quality of your concentration, to read how it affects the breath energy in the body, and to make sure the energy feels balanced, at ease, healthy. In this way your concentration is self-correcting because it’s got right view built into it.

That’s because it’s the kind of concentration that listens, notices; it’s based on interest—*citta*—which is one of the bases for success. This factor has to be present in all states of right concentration. Whether or not it’s the factor you’re consciously emphasizing, it’s got to be there, paying close attention to what you’re doing, noticing where you’re adding unnecessary stress, and then learning how to stop doing the things that are causing that unnecessary stress. Even though this inquiry is just on the level of the breath, it’s an application of the four noble truths.

So this interest is a way of listening to what the body needs as you focus on its various parts. It’s as if you ask: “What do you need, stomach? What kind of breath energy would feel good right here?” Give it what it wants. Then you

move to the chest. “What do you need, chest? What breath energy would feel good right here?” Just pose those questions and try to maintain that steady awareness to watch, to respond. As you learn how to balance the force of your concentration with a sense of wellbeing in the energy in the body, you find that a lot of the elements of the path come into a balanced relationship. They’re healing. That’s when you know when you’re doing it right.

In this way you give all the different parts of the body a chance to tell you what they need. And because a lot of the energy flow in the body is related to different issues in the mind, you’ll find that parts of the mind that tended to not have a voice now start having a voice as well. You allow them to get healed, too. All of this, just as you focus on the breath, is your medicine: steady awareness combined with interest, monitoring the breath. A source of happiness that harms no one, that’s healing to the mind. When the mind has been healed in this way or even while it’s in the process of healing, you find that your relationships with other people are a lot less strained. You’re putting a lot less pressure on them, because you’re putting a lot less pressure on yourself.

So again, this is a responsible way of looking for happiness. Don’t believe those voices in the mind that say you’re being irresponsible as you stay here with the breath, or as you focus attention on your own mind. You’re focusing your attention on a source of happiness that doesn’t harm anybody. And that’s a noble pursuit right there.