

## *Make Yourself Small*

*September 30, 2007*

Ajaan Lee has a Dhamma talk where he talks about how big the Buddha was—how big the Buddha is. He said his body is so big that they've been making images of it for 2,500 years and they still haven't made enough. His mouth was so big that his Dhamma is still with us. His mind was so big that he was able not only to teach the Dhamma, but also formulate the Vinaya. He put together a community that's lasted 2,500 years.

Ajaan Lee goes on to say the Buddha's large size came from the fact that he was first willing to make himself small. He cut himself off from his family, all of his comforts of life, went and focused his mind ultimately just on his breath, one small, little spot. He stayed there until he was capable of learning as much as he could from that one small, little spot—to the point where he totally understood it, totally mastered it. That was how his goodness then exploded out to fill the world, as we see today.

In the same way, when we meditate, we have to make ourselves small, both as we live in a community like this and as we practice our meditation. As we live in a group like this, we want to make sure that the fact there are many of us doesn't get in the way of one another's practice. One way of doing that is making your needs small, making your demands small.

We've got that chant reflecting on the requisites to remind ourselves how much eating is necessary and how much is more than necessary; how much attention to clothing and shelter is necessary and how much is more. So when we're not wasting our time on excessive food, clothing, shelter, and medicine, we're placing less of a burden on other people—the people immediately around us—and it spreads out in a large network.

You have to realize that the food you eat comes through suffering—the suffering of animals, the suffering of farmers, the suffering of transport workers, the suffering of grocery workers all the way down the line. The same goes for clothing, shelter, and medicine. So you want to minimize the suffering that you cause, the weight that you place on others. In your dealings with the people around you, you want again to have a small footprint and think more of what you can give as opposed to what you can get.

The Buddha says there are four qualities that help ensure everything from a family to a larger society will stay together, hang together, and be for the benefit of all involved.

The first is that you learn to be generous—generous with material things, generous with your time, generous with your forgiveness. The second is that you try to speak in a kind way. Even when you have negative things to say, you try to couch them in terms that the other person will be able to receive and not feel insulted, not feel belittled, not feel that you have contempt.

Psychologists have done studies to show that the worst thing for any kind of relationship is contempt. There's that story of the videotapes they make of couples—short videotapes, only a few minutes long. They hook them up to sensors that will measure their heartbeat and the sweat coming out of their palms, whatever the signs of tension might be, and then put them on videotape and have them talk about a minor item of conflict in the relationship. Then they go back, watch the videos and slow them down so that they can catch the micro-expressions.

They said they've been able to predict with a great deal of accuracy which relationships are going to last and which ones won't. The ones that won't are the ones where there's the slightest hint of contempt or sarcasm, either in the tone of voice or in the expression of the face. So when you have negative things to say to other people about their behavior, try to do it in a way that doesn't indicate any contempt at all. You're genuinely trying to help. You show this by the way you choose your words and choose your timing—when and where you say these things so that you're not embarrassing the other person.

So kind words are the second principle.

After generosity and kind words, then there comes genuine helpfulness. You see what the other person really needs, and if you're in a position to provide it, you go ahead. You don't make a show of helping them just to make a good impression on them. You don't do it for their sake or anyone else's sake. You do it for the sake of the practice, for the sake of developing your own goodness. You try to see what needs to be done, and then you go ahead and do it. One of the lessons I learned from my father is there are a lot of jobs that need to be done in the world that nobody wants to do. So they provide a huge, wide-open opportunity for you to develop your goodness with no competition. Look for that kind of job, those kinds of tasks around the monastery or wherever you're living.

And then, finally, there's consistency. When you're helpful, you're consistently helpful. When you speak kind words, you're consistently kind in your words, both to the person's face and behind the person's back. These four qualities help the community to get along.

Notice that all of them require a lot of input on your part: a lot of giving; giving your time, giving your energy, giving a lot of thought to what you're doing and saying. The best way to give is to learn how to make your own needs as small as possible. In other words, learn how to get the most out of little things—what you've got. As meditators, we're honest businessmen and businesswomen, not dishonest ones. The dishonest ones are trying to make the most out of nothing, whereas honest ones have a little bit and they learn how to cultivate that little bit they've got.

So what have you got here? You've got the body sitting here breathing; you've got the mind thinking and aware. You stick with the breathing. And even though you may know there are other steps further along the path, you make sure that you do each step well, because how you do anything is how you do everything. This goes all the way back to that principle of non-linear causality. It's the little, tiny bits of your experience that show the whole pattern of the

universe at large. Instead of running around, trying to sketch the universe, you learn about the universe by trying to get really well focused on one little thing. So you get the mind focused on the breath.

In the beginning, stay with one spot. Learn how to relate to that one spot in a way that doesn't squeeze it too hard, yet is not too loose about it. What's the right amount of pressure to bring to the breath so that you can stay with the breath and, at the same time, not constrict the breath? You develop your sense of touch with this one spot. Now, you may have to experiment to see what spot in the body feels best to stay concentrated on. In the course of the day, it might change. Well, learn how to be good at different spots, but always take just one spot at a time and focus your full attention there.

This is how little things get to grow. It's like starting a fire with a magnifying glass and a piece of paper. You go out into the sun, and you concentrate as much of the light of the sun on as little a spot as you can. Focus very precisely, and the paper will finally be set on fire. The fire will spread to envelop the whole piece of paper. In the same way with the meditation, try to get really well focused on one spot. You don't put so much pressure on it that it creates a sense of dis-ease or constriction in the body. You're trying to learn how to bring the mind and the body together in a way where they don't interfere with each other. The classic image is of holding a baby chick in your hand. If you hold it too tightly, it's going to die. If you hold it too loosely, it's going to fly away. So find the right amount of pressure to bring to the breath, and then try to be as consistent as possible with it. Anything else that comes along in the mind, you say, "Not now. Not right now."

If you do find the mind has slipped away, don't engage in a lot of recrimination. This is one of those places where there's no shame and no blame. In other words, you're not here to prove something to yourself about what kind of person you are. You're not trying to prove anything to anybody else. You're not doing this to be better than other people, or to get engaged in all those old narratives about, "Well, you're this way about everything. You can't even focus on your breath. You can't do this—you can't do that": That kind of thinking doesn't help at all. You're here to find what works and what doesn't work.

The Buddha never used guilt in his instructions. And the type of shame he advised was not being ashamed of yourself as a person, but being ashamed of the idea of doing certain things that you know are wrong. That's it. As for areas where you're still exploring, okay, there's no shame and no blame. You're learning, trying to learn cause and effect, so you can clear away a lot of those attitudes as well. In other words, you're stripping down all the excess baggage in your mind as you find it accumulating around this one spot.

So it's not just a process of staring at the one spot and not using any discernment at all. You've got to use your discernment in cutting away the obstacles, the distractions, the things that pull you away—whether an emotion, a thought, a memory, or a distraction. If you can simply note that you've been distracted or pulled away and can come back to the breath, that's

fine. If you find yourself more entangled than that, then use your discernment to figure out how to untangle yourself. If it's an emotion, try to dissipate the physical charge of the emotion by thinking of the energy going out down your arms to the palms of the hands and out down your legs to the soles of the feet and out. In other words, don't keep it bottled up inside.

And then, when that initial wave of energy is past, you can look at what's left. What were the narratives you were carrying around in your mind that allowed you to get triggered by the particular event that inspired the emotion? Do you really want to carry those narratives around? Are they helpful? Learn how to question them and create better, new narratives to replace them.

Or better yet, remind yourself you're here to learn about cause and effect, pure and simple, here in the present moment. Think about how the Buddha approached that. In the first watch of the night on the night of his awakening, it was his personal narratives. You think you've got a lot of stories. Imagine all of his stories for the eons of cosmic expansion and contraction that he could remember. As Ajaan Fuang once said, it's good that most of us don't remember our past lives. We'd have lots of scores to settle.

But notice that the Buddha didn't go straight from that knowledge to focusing on the four noble truths in the present moment. He went through a second knowledge, which was to ask the question: "Is this just me who gets reborn like this? How about other beings? And what's the pattern underlying all this?" And he had that vision of the whole cosmos from Brahmans on down to the lowest levels of hell, and people being born in one level after having died from another level. He began to see a pattern that was in line with our actions: the things done and said and thought under the influence of right views and wrong views.

Once he saw that pattern, he was ready to apply that pattern to the present moment. What intentions did he have in the present moment? What were his views in the present moment? What kind of views would help put an end to the intentions that kept him tied to the cycle of rebirth? He finally arrived at the four noble truths, seeing that these were the right views: seeing things in terms of stress, its cause, the cessation of stress, and the path of cessation to stress. In other words, seeing things in terms of cause and effect, skillful and unskillful: That was how he was able to approach awakening.

Now, notice there were no personal narratives in that last knowledge. He got out of his personal narratives by stepping back and looking at the universe as a whole, seeing large-scale patterns. So if a memory comes up about something unskillful you did in the past, think: Okay, am I the only person who's done unskillful things? That's not the case. Even the Buddha did unskillful things. You read in the Jataka tales that not everything he does is pristine and pure, yet still he was able to get past his mistakes and attain awakening.

In other words, think in larger terms.

That's why we have recollection of the Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Sangha as meditation themes for when things get dry or feverish in the mind. Look for the larger pattern,

and then get back to the present moment in a less narratively-charged way. Try to drop as much baggage as you can. Strip away all these excess and unnecessary things—not because you're a bad person if you hold on to them, but simply that holding on to them just doesn't help. It's a waste of time. Stick with the determination to do things as skillfully as possible. Even when you notice you've dropped your object and want to come back to it, try to do that in a skillful way—which means being willing to do it over and over and over again and not getting flustered, not getting discouraged or upset.

When you've learned how to do one thing really well like this, then you can start expanding from there. You've learned the right amount of pressure to bring to the breath, the right balance of stillness and questioning to bring to the breath to keep the mind with its one spot in the present moment. Then you can start expanding. You start expanding the breath throughout the body, exploring the different ways that the breath energy moves. And start exploring the other elements after that.

Take things step by step. Don't try to gobble down too much at once. After all, we're trying to learn how to make the most out of little things. If you can't make the most out of little things, you're going to make a mess out of big things. The big things *come* from little things: That's their foundation. It's the same as when they teach you the piano. You start out with scales. It sounds boring, but the ability to play scales really well is going to show up in all of the rest of your piano playing.

So work on your scales. And one of the talents you learn, working on your scales, is how to keep yourself going even when it's boring, how to find interest in things that are not interesting to a casual glance. But when you look at them and get to know them, you learn about your hands. You learn about the muscles of your hands, the way your fingers go. There are lots of subtleties you can learn by sticking with little things, keeping things small to begin with and being really, really observant.

That's how the Buddha went from being very small to very large. And that's how the results of our practice can go from small to very large—by making sure that you do the small things well.