

Allies

May 29, 2005

Often the evening chants before we meditate have some pretty sobering thoughts. We're subject to aging, illness, death, and separation. Our actions are important for our happiness and sorrow. This body we have here is filled with all kinds of stuff. We have to look after it. And what does it do? It just grows old and dies.

But the chants don't leave it there. They go on to express a wish for happiness, not only for yourself but also for all living beings. Compassion for all living beings. Appreciation. These are thoughts to remind us that not all is hopeless. In spite of the difficulties, trials, and tribulations in our lives, there's a way to true happiness. And the wish for happiness is not a futile thing.

It's important to remind ourselves of this every time we meditate, because that's what the meditation is all about. It's also important as a beginning step, to give ourselves a sense of confidence as we meditate. As Ajaan Suwat would often say, start out with a sense of confidence. Start out with a sense of conviction in what you're doing. The skill we're working on here has been something that has been handed down for the past 2,600 years because it works. The people who found that it works are people of integrity, people we can trust. What we're doing is learning how to use this skill to become trustworthy people, people of integrity, ourselves.

So try to start the meditation every time from a position of strength, a position of mental well-being. If you find yourself feeling dejected, despondent, or discouraged, try to find ways to think that will get you un-dejected, encouraged again. You can think about the Buddha. You can think about the Dhamma, the Sangha. Or if you have doubts about yourself, think about the good things you've done in the past. That gets you in the right state of mind to meditate. You're building on the good you've already done. You're building on the good you trust in other people.

The same principle works in the physical side of the meditation as well. You find a spot in the body where you feel comfortable, where it feels easy to stay focused, where it feels natural to stay focused. Then try to find a sense of well-being, a physical sense of ease and pleasure there, using the breath. Sometimes this means allowing the breath to be very subtle, sometimes stronger, but try to find a rhythm and a texture of breathing that sustains a sense of physical comfort right there. Stay there for a while, so that your mental sense of confidence and your

physical sense of comfort support one another. Then from that position of well-being, you let it grow. Think of that sense of well-being spreading throughout the body. You don't have to move anywhere, just stay right there, but think of that sense of ease spreading around to bathe the whole body, like melted butter flowing through your whole system.

Once you've done that for a while, then you can start surveying the body to see where the melted butter hasn't melted away any feelings of tension or tightness. By that time, you should've developed the kind of focus that helps to melt them away. We have two ways of paying attention to the body. One is that we improve the blood-flow to the spots where we're focused, but in order to keep our attention focused, we tend to squeeze the blood flow off in other parts of the body. Another way is actually the other way around: We squeeze things off in the part that we are focused on. The second one is not the kind of focus you want to develop. You want to have an open focus that creates a sense of well-being where your attention is focused, where your attention is placed.

Once you've developed that kind of focus, then you can move it around the body and you're not going to cause any harm. Ultimately, though, what you want is a focus that's open all around. But to get there, you have to move through the different parts of the body, see what blocks of tension you can work through. As Ajaan Lee says at one point, the breath is actually the solvent for the medicine. The real medicine here is your mindfulness and alertness. Once you've trained your attention to be the kind that's not constricting but open, then you can move it around and use the breath as a solvent to get it through the body.

Work through the parts that you can, and then once you've been through the body a couple of times, you can settle down. Think of your awareness as a broad, open awareness spreading to fill the whole body. Allow the different parts of the body to breathe in unison so that they're not working in cross-purposes.

What you're doing is taking your strengths and building them up, in the same way as when you take thoughts of goodwill to create a sense of mental well-being and build on that. You have to remember as you're practicing, the Buddha is not asking to develop anything from scratch, what you never had before. We all have our goodness. We all have our skills. It's just that they're not complete. They're not all around.

So what we're doing is taking what we've got already and learning how to enhance it, maximize it.

This is an important attitude to have every time you run into a problem in the meditation. Remember: You do have your strengths. Try to build on them. If you didn't have any good to you at all, then the Earth would open beneath you and

swallow you up. The fact that you're still sitting here means you've got some good to you. So you take that good and you put it to use.

As Ajaan Fuang used to say, you invest it. It's like gaining a profit from an enterprise and then, instead of eating up the profits, you invest the profits again, you get some more profits, and you invest them again. You find that the sense of well-being you have will grow and grow and grow. Even if it doesn't push out all the sense of dis-ease in the mind, at least it gives you a place to stay from which you can watch the sense of dis-ease, both in the body and in the mind, from a position where you don't feel threatened by it.

This is where you can really put to use the Buddha's teachings on the four noble truths. The duty with regard to suffering and stress, he says, is to comprehend it. Most of the time, we feel threatened by it, we feel engulfed by it, surrounded by it, squeezed in by it, so the only thing we can think of it is how to get away, how to get ourselves out of that situation. That's not comprehending. That's just trying to run away. But when you're looking at it from a position of strength, from a position of well-being, you don't feel threatened. Then you can really look at it to see for what it is.

Ajaan Lee used to get some criticism in Thailand for teaching people to be addicted to pleasure. But the criticism came from people who didn't understand what he was doing. You take what pleasure you've got, and you learn how to maximize it, and use it as your friend, as your ally. After all, the Buddha said, right concentration is composed of pleasure and rapture, and it's part of the path. It's not that he's teaching you to be addicted to it. He's simply teaching you to learn how to use it as a tool.

We very rarely think of using these things as tools. We think of them as the payment at the end of the road, to reward us at the end of a hard day's work. But as the Buddha pointed out, that kind of pleasure in and of itself, any kind of pleasure in and of itself, is based on conditions. It can't be taken as an end in and of itself. But you can use it as part of the path, as a tool. That's what we're trying to do here.

As in the story of the Ramayana: When Rama loses his wife, Sita, he's off in the forest and doesn't have an army. He's going to do battle with one of the biggest demons in the world. So he gathers together an army of what he can find. It turns out to be an army of monkeys, which may not seem much to work with, but it turns out that these are pretty special monkeys. In the end he wins, because he learns how to make the most of his allies.

That's got to be your attitude as a meditator. You've got your allies. Don't underestimate them. Learn how to help them along, and they'll help you. Your

ability to think encouraging thoughts: That's an ally. Your ability to work with the breath: That's an ally. So make the most of them.