

Eeeels

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Ajaan Fuang once made a comparison. When you're meditating, he said, it's like trying to catch hold of the mind, in the same way you'd try to catch hold of eels. If you just jump down into the mud and try to grab hold of the eels, they'll slip off every which way. The trick is to find something they like. The analogy is not a very pretty one, but he said that one thing that eels really like is a dead dog. So you find a dead dog someplace and you stick it into a big jar and you put that out in the mud. The eels will come into the jar on their own. Then you put your hand over the mouth of the jar, and there you are: You've got your eels.

The analogy has to do with the breath. You want to make the breath comfortable, to give the mind something it likes. If your mind likes dead dogs, give it a dead dog. If it likes comfortable breath, give it a comfortable breath. Pay close attention to how the breathing feels. It's really a shame how we let the breathing process go to waste, because if you pay attention to it, you can get so much out of the breath. There are ways of breathing that are good for your heart; there are ways of breathing that are good for your lungs, your liver, all the different organs in the body. If you only were to stay and pay attention long enough, you'd begin to see that. You'd get a lot of use out of the breath.

As a medicine, it's ideal. Doesn't cost any money. You don't have to send to Canada for cheaper versions. It's free right here all the time. You can take it with you wherever you go. All it requires is that you take some time and watch. Be observant. See connections. As you get more interested in exploring the breath and it gets more comfortable, the mind will be more and more likely to want to settle down and stay.

Then the next question is what to do when you've got it to settle down. In other words, once you've got your eel, what are you going to do with it? Well, you want to observe it. To be observant, you have to stay very, very alert. This is one of the problems people often encounter as the mind settles down: The quality of alertness gets a little blurry. The breath may get so subtle that you can't follow it. That sense of comfort may be so nice that you just want to wallow in it. But we're here to observe this eel, because the eel has its uses but it could also—I don't know much about eels, but imagine a dangerous eel, not just an ordinary eel. This is a Moray eel. It can bite and cause damage. So you want to watch and see exactly how damaging it can be. Sometimes it's a greedy eel, sometimes it's an angry eel, a

deluded eel. If you want to understand why it acts that way, you've got to be very, very alert.

Often our problem is that greed, anger, and delusion take over the mind before we've even realized that there's anything going on. In other words, we've already capitulated to them before we realize, "Hey, somebody else is in power." Actually, the mind has its warning signals before greed, anger, or delusion takes over. They arise in very weak ways. There are stages to their arising, and you want to alert enough to see that. Which means that once the mind is beginning to settle down and get very still, and the breath gets very refined, you've got to give the mind work to do, to keep it alert.

This is one of the reasons why the Buddha recommends right concentration as a whole-body awareness. Sometimes we hear that concentration means one-pointedness of mind, and we think, well, we've got to get it to one point. But if you got one-pointedness on a very subtle object, and the object disappears, you're caught. If you try to hold on to that one point as you walk around throughout the day, you can lose it very quickly, because you've also got to pay attention to other things. But once things get comfortable with the breath, and you're aiming at a whole-body awareness, you can start spreading the breath around different parts of the body, because the breathing process is not just air coming in and out of the lungs. It's a whole-body process. It can engage your entire nervous system. In fact, ideally, it should—all your nerves out to the pores of your skin. Think of them up all opening up, so that the current of breathing energy can go all the way through the nervous system, going down if that feels right, coming up if that feels better.

Then learn how to maintain that whole-body awareness. Because it does take a certain amount of effort, more than just the amount of effort that's enough to keep you awake, to keep you alert. It's something you want to maintain in all your activities. When anything comes into the mind, it comes within that range of your whole-body awareness. As the nerves open up your awareness in the different parts of the body, you begin to realize that there were sections that were cut off. And you open up also to the areas where thoughts begin to form.

The formation of a thought usually starts as a little disturbance—or a little wavering, wiggling, whatever—and at the very beginning, it's hard to tell whether it's a physical or mental sensation. It's on the borderline between the two. Then the mind scouts around, coming across this disturbance, and says, "What is this? Ah, it's a thought about x , a thought about y ." It'll grab hold of it if it looks interesting and then fashion it into something more and more elaborate. Then, at some point, the process becomes conscious—but by that point, it's already taken over.

What you're doing as you open up your body to your awareness is that you expand the range of consciousness so that your subconscious gives way. You can actually see these incipient thoughts, these nascent thoughts as they begin to wiggle, to begin to form, and you can catch the process before it takes over.

These are some of the advantages of having a whole-body awareness. It feels good. It's stable and it enables you to see a lot of the hidden nooks and crannies in the mind. You can watch all the subtle behavior of this eel you've got here and figure out when it's going to begin to get dangerous. Then you can train it not to be dangerous. Get it more and more under your control.

All the dangers in life, ultimately come from the mind. Things come from outside and they may seem threatening, but the big threat is how your mind reacts to them, what it makes of them. If you don't have it under control, who knows what the reaction is going to be? All too often, we do and say and think things, and then later we say, "Why did I do that? Why did I say that?" It's especially sad when there's regret, the regret coming from fact you know you could have acted in a different way. You should've known better but you didn't act on what you knew better, and now you've got to deal with the consequences. This eel we have can cause a lot of problems in that way.

If you keep watch on your eel, you'll find that there are really no other dangers. Things may happen outside, all kinds of catastrophes can happen outside, but as long as the mind is clear of greed, anger, and delusion, you really have nothing to worry about, nothing to fear. But the only way you can keep it clear, the only you can uproot these patterns of behavior, is to be very, very, very alert.

One of the activities we're doing here as we meditate is that we're testing the Buddha's teachings. Before you can really test them properly, you have to become more alert so that you can really watch and trust your observations. It's like those expert tasters that they hire at food companies. They take some years to train their tongues, to train their vocabulary, so that they can detect really subtle differences in tastes, and their opinions are worthwhile.

It's the same with meditators. We learn to be connoisseurs of the mind, expert observers of the mind. Which means we have to watch and compare. Try to get very, very precise in noticing the movements of the mind. It's only then that you can begin to trust your powers of judgment, your powers of perception.

So in your quest to get the mind still, don't go over to the other extreme, where you make it so still that it's not really observant anymore. You can drift off into a nice peaceful quiet place that feels really nice, but then you come out of it, you realize that it was nice, it was pleasant, it was restful, great stress reduction, but you missed the chance to get even more use out of it. You relax and pacify the

eel, but that doesn't guarantee that the eel won't come back and bite you at some other time.

So realize that it's not just for stress reduction or relaxation that we're meditating here. We really want to observe the mind, and train ourselves to be good observers, so that we can detect where the mind can cause trouble, and we can also detect ways we can prevent that trouble with enough alertness, so that ultimately we get to the point where there's no chance of any trouble arising at all, and this eel of ours will hold no dangers.