

Elemental Normalcy

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Traditionally, when you're practicing metta meditation, you start with people who are easy to feel metta or goodwill for: people close to your heart, people you love. And then once you feel a sense of well-being with that goodwill, you start spreading the same thoughts to others who are more and more difficult until you find that you can sincerely wish that all people and all beings find true happiness. You extend goodwill to them all.

The same principle applies to the breath. When you're working with the breath—trying to get acquainted with the breath in the body and to use the breath energies in the body—it's good to start with an area that's relatively comfortable so that you're coming from a place of well-being. As for the more difficult parts, the parts where there's tension or tightness, don't go right there. Go first to the areas that are relatively relaxed, open, at ease.

Even though the ease may not be much to begin with, you can protect it and pay careful attention to it. It's the paying careful attention that's going to make the breath comfortable because you get more sensitive. And as you get more sensitive to the kind of breathing that you would ordinarily put up with, you decide you don't like it any more. You want something better. So you make adjustments until the breath meets with your new standards.

Then when it feels good staying there, you can start moving out and working on other areas that are more tense, more tight. Think of the breath energy penetrating them. Remind yourself that the breath is actually there first. All too often we have the image of pain as being like a wall or a solid block, and we're trying to force breath through the wall. But you have to reflect on the fact that your sensation of the body, your awareness of the body comes first through the breath. The breath is prior; it belongs there first. Hold that perception of breath being first, and it'll help break up the sense of solidity around the pain or around the tension.

That way, the breath gets spread throughout the different parts of the body until you can actually be with the whole body even though there may be a few little pains nibbling here and there. But for the most part, most of the body has a sense of being connected. The energy's flowing freely so that if any parts of the breath energy field feel weak right now, you can think of breath energy that's healthy in another part of the body going right there—to the point where your perception of body is all breath.

This is one aspect of what's called singleness of preoccupation. You're with one topic, one perception, and that one perception fills the range of your body. Your awareness fills the body.

The reason we meditate in quiet like this, where things are still, is so that you can get good at this skill by giving it your full attention. But you don't want to use this skill only when things are quiet and when you're meditating. These are skills you can carry into the rest of your life. For example, today, we were talking about sitting in a meeting. You don't have to be bored by the meeting. You can play with your breath energies.

You find that even as you get involved in more and more complex activities, you can still have some sense of the breath energy in the body. It may be too much to ask you to keep track of whether the breath is coming in or going out, but just have a sense of the general field of energy and whether it feels connected—whether it feels at ease. And any parts that are not at ease, you breathe right through. This now enables you to put up with situations that otherwise might be very unpleasant and say, “At least I've got a friend here.”

This is the key to learning patience and endurance. You don't focus on the bad things that are happening around you; you focus on the things that you have some control over that you can make pleasant. This way, it's not simply a matter of bearing up, bearing up, bearing up against something that's difficult. You're got some friends inside.

And when we say that you can bring this skill into the rest of your life, that includes the parts of life that you don't like, that nobody likes—like aging, illness, and death. You can use the breath to help give the mind a more pleasant place to stay as you're sick, as you find that the body's beginning to fall apart, even as you're dying. Of course, you're going to have to leave the breath at the moment of death, but the skills you've gained in learning how to get the mind to settle down, particularly the skills you've learned in how not to go with distractions, are going to be very important at that point. They'll be crucial to your well-being. You want to be able to die in a good mood. And a lot of that will require all the skills in meditation.

So when you're facing an illness, you've got the breath to help you. But there are other skills we develop in meditation that also help, like learning how to take apart a narrative that's building up in the mind. The mind has this tendency, especially when the body's healthy and everything's going well, to spin out lots of potential narratives and use them as entertainment to see how many different narratives you can create, how many different selves you could create in different

worlds of your imagination. If you followed this desire, what would that be like? If you followed that desire, what would that be like?

But as the body begins to shut down, you realize that that particular tendency can get you in trouble. So as we're learning how to meditate here, we're learning how to take thoughts apart—to deconstruct them—and that's going to be an essential skill.

So how do you take them apart? Well, one, you try to notice how they form. All too often, we're with the breath and suddenly, before we realize it, we're someplace else, as if a curtain had gone down in the mind. As it goes up again, we suddenly find ourselves in a new scene, like a new scene in a play. And you have to ask yourself, "How did it happen?" You get back to the breath and you make up your mind that the next time there's any indication that the mind is going to go someplace else, you want to be alert to it.

Over time, you find that you actually can begin to see the telltale signs that the mind is getting ready to leave. It's like an inchworm at the edge of a leaf. Part of it is on the leaf, but another part is already waving around, looking for the next leaf to hop on to. And as soon as the other leaf comes, it's gone. The mind may be with the breath, but it's not fully there. It doesn't have all of its feet on the breath.

So when you see that sign, you have to breathe in a way that's especially gratifying, that's especially arresting, to pull your attention back. And as you get closer and closer to seeing how these things begin, you come to see that there's just a little stirring right at the place where the mind and the body meet. The stirring could be interpreted either as a physical stirring or as a mental stirring, and you have the choice. You can treat it as a case of tension in the body or you can treat it as a potential thought-world. We're very good at that: "What's this about?" We slap a perception on it, "Oh, this is a thought about x ." Then you get into that topic, and you go running with it.

Well, you have the choice. As soon as that little squiggle or stirring of energy appears, breathe through it. And you'll find that you'll nip a lot of thinking in the bud. Then you get back to the breath. You haven't really left the breath; you've just directed your attention, together with the breath, to that spot to smooth or comb out the little knot that was beginning to develop there.

Now, as you do this, part of the mind will object. That's the part you want to catch, the part that says, "I want some entertainment. I want to think about this desire, and I want to be thinking about who I am, or where I'm going, and what world I'm going to live in." It's what they call becoming, which we're doing all the time. You have to ask yourself why you go for these things. This is where you bring

in the teachings on inconstancy, stress, and not-self. Where do these thoughts lead? They lead to more stress, more stress, more stress.

You start out, and the thought seems to be under your control. But then, as the thought-world develops, it gets out of your control. That's the not-self part. It's going to do things that you didn't want. And when you can anticipate that, that helps, again, to nip in the bud a lot of your desire to go with the thought-world. You want to bring things back to something very elemental right here, where there are very few narratives. In fact, the fewer narratives, the better. Breath, awareness, a sense of the body, feeling: Let these things be as impersonal as possible with as few narratives as possible. And the narratives can lose a lot of their hooks.

I was talking this evening with a student who's been told by his doctors he has two to ten months left to live. He's got cancer. He's been trying all kinds of different treatments, and the last one didn't work. The doctors say that someone in his position has two to ten months, and they talk about all the potential treatments they want to do. But tonight, I think he wanted to talk about what happens if the treatments don't work.

That's the big issue right there. You've got to get things as elemental as possible in your awareness because if you start thinking about life ending, it becomes very dramatic. Your identity's ending: That gets dramatic. But if you see that these are just elements—there's awareness, there's feeling, there's a sense of the body, a sense of the breath—and leave them as impersonal as possible, it gets a lot easier to let them go when they have to go.

He was commenting ironically that all of his life, he'd wanted to become somebody special—make a name for himself. And just in the last couple of months, he actually did gain a little bit of fame. But now, he was beginning to realize that this was all meaningless right now. And as long as you can see that as meaningless, it takes a lot of the sting away. So you get things elemental.

There was a woman, a student of Ajaan Fuang, who was meditating one night. I've told the story before, but it bears retelling. A voice came to her, saying, "You're going to die tonight." So she figured, "Well, if I'm going to die, I might as well die meditating." So she continued sitting there. And sure enough, the body started developing pains all over the place. She said it was like being in a house on fire. No matter which room you went into, it was on fire. In other words, there was pain everywhere, and nowhere for her to stay.

Then she realized, okay, there's the space element—in other words, a sense of space around the body. And you can think of it, perceive it as penetrating through the body. You can go there. She made that the topic of her meditation. And when

she came back out of meditation, everything in the body had settled down. So she hadn't died, but she had learned an important lesson.

When you get things elemental like this—just space, or just knowing—then as things begin to fall apart, or your brain's not working very well anymore, you can just maintain that sense of being aware, aware, aware. If you can be aware of the breath and can make that comfortable, that's fine. If you can be aware of the space, fine. But again, keep it as impersonal as possible. Then when you go, the mind goes in a much better shape than it would have otherwise when it was trying to grab on to things.

There's a famous *ajaan* in Thailand who had a student who was dying of cancer. She came and meditated with him for three months. He gave a long series of talks, and the lesson he repeated over and over again was to try and get a sense of awareness, the observer, as clear and distinct as possible—as something separate from the pain, separate from the body. They're there together in the same space, but you can think of them being on different frequencies, different levels. You hold on to that sense of awareness. Other things can pass through and it's not affected nearly as badly as when you try to hang on to this or hang on to that.

So keep things elemental. This is what a lot of the not-self teaching is all about. The Buddha's not saying there *is* no self; he's not saying there *is* a self. He's simply saying that "self" is an activity; it's a type of clinging. And wherever there's clinging, there's going to be suffering. Now, while you're on the path, there are certain types of self that you want to hold on to. But when you find that holding on to them is getting in the way of finding a deeper peace, a deeper sense of well-being, you can let them go. In that way, the mind is not creating problems for itself.

Learn how to depersonalize things. This is a good lesson for daily life again. When we're dealing with difficult people, the Buddha says to tell yourself, "Unpleasant sounds are making contact at the ear," and leave it at that. Don't make it more personal than just that. Realize that human speech has all kinds of qualities. It can be good; it can be bad. It can be friendly, unfriendly, true or false, well-meaning or ill-meaning. That's just the nature of human speech. So the fact that some unpleasant speech is being directed at you is not all that much out of the ordinary.

When you can see these things as normal, it's a lot easier to deal with them. When you learn how to see aging, illness, and death as normal, it's a lot easier to deal with them. That passage that we regularly chant about being subject to aging, illness, and death: In Thai, it's translated as "aging is normal, illness is normal, and

death is normal.” So learn how to treat them as normal things. That removes a lot of the sting.

Years back, we had someone else coming to visit the monastery, undergoing radiation treatments. He told me that the doctors had given him an 80 percent chance of survival. Everybody was talking about the 80 percent, the 80 percent. Of course, that made him wonder about the 20 percent. So I said, okay, here we’re going to talk about the 20 percent. There are things you can do to prepare for death just like you prepare for aging and illness.

So you have all these potentials here that you can actually fall back on and actually use. They’re your help as you go through the difficulties of life: aging, illness, and death. There is space; there is the breath; there’s awareness. If you don’t complicate things by putting a lot of personal narratives in there, your perception, your sense of these things can actually be a support for you, so that when things have to leave—when you have to be parted from things—you can do it without suffering. You say, “Okay, this is something normal, too.”

This is what the Buddha’s giving us: a range of skills that, whatever happens in life, it’s normal. The mind doesn’t have to make a big deal out of it. When it makes a big deal out of things, it’s creating a huge, big mass of suffering.

So these are the skills that he has to offer. And it’s in our best interests to develop them as best we can. We’ve got the opportunity right now. We’re still healthy, strong. Our brains are still working. So work on developing these skills that you’ll need when things are not going so well.

Ajaan Suwat, after he had his accident, had some brain damage. He told me he learned how to see the perceptions coming up in his mind simply just as that, perceptions, and he learned how to recognize them when they were off and when they were not. A lot of it had to do with not identifying with the perceptions, having a sense of the observer who just watches. And even though this observer is a construct, it can be very, very helpful.

In Ajaan Mun’s instructions to Ajaan Maha Boowa, he said anything that comes up in your meditation that you’re not quite sure about, go back to the observer. Just watch it, and you’ll come out safe.

Well, the same principle applies to a lot of the other suffering, or potential sufferings, in life. If you don’t dramatize them, if you don’t make big deals out of them, but learn to watch them as normal, you’ll come out safe.