

## *The Desire for Things to Be Different*

*September 23, 2022*

You're going to be sitting here with your eyes closed for an hour, so try to make it a pleasant experience. Take a couple of good long, deep, in-and-out breaths, and ask yourself where in that process of breathing is the potential for ease, pleasure, a sense of fullness in the body?

If there doesn't seem to be much pleasure just yet, focus on the parts that are okay, but don't think that they have to stay just that way. Learn how to develop the potentials you have here, because the breath does have a lot of potentials.

You'll find that the use of your perceptions will make a big difference: how you visualize the breath to yourself, how you pay attention to the different parts of the body, how you react to the parts of the body where there are patterns of tension. Can you focus on them in a way that begins to disperse the tension? Can you spread your awareness around so that it envelops the body and dissolves away any bits of tension here and there that otherwise would stay there because you're not aware of them, or you're not paying attention to them?

Ajaan Lee talks about the breath being the medium by which the medicine of alertness and mindfulness can make a difference in how you're feeling your body right now. That's one of the big lessons in concentration practice, one of the most important lessons: that you *can* change things.

Think of how Ajaan Lee discovered this method: He'd gone into the forest, walked with another monk for three days to a very out-of-the-way place. They were going to spend the Rains retreat there, depending on a hill tribe village for alms. Well, a few days after they arrived he had a heart attack. As he said, he was ready to die if he had to, but he wanted a sign: Was there a possibility that he might survive? And there were a couple of signs that indicated that, yes, he could.

So he set about to see what he had to work with. He didn't have much. The diet there, from the point of view of Thai medicine, was really bad for the heart—a lot of bamboo shoots. In Thai medicine, heart attacks are basically considered a disease of the wind element, and bamboo shoots are bad for the wind element. So

his food wasn't going to be his salvation. He realized he would have to work on the wind element from within.

Now, he'd already seen some yogis in India, noticing how they used the breath element in their bodies to stand in single positions for long periods of time out under the sun. He had learned a little bit about that. Now he was going to explore it even further.

That's how he pulled himself together. He looked at the potentials he had, saw what he could do with them, and as a result at the end of the Rains retreat he was able to walk out—three days to get back to civilization. He lived for another eight years.

So he didn't just say, "Oh, this is what a heart-attack is like. It's like this." He didn't tell himself that the desire for things to be different was bad. He wanted to explore: What are the potentials here? To see how far they could go.

This is why we have Method Two in *Keeping the Breath in Mind*. It's also why we have that passage where he talks about how when you're working on concentration, you're taking what's inconstant and trying to make it constant. You're taking what's stressful and trying to make it easeful. And you take what's not under your control and see how far you can control it. You push against those three perceptions, and in doing so, you create a path.

This is how the path works in general. You don't start with equanimity; you start with the principle of action: that your actions can make a difference.

Back in medieval India when they introduced the four noble truths in the basic textbooks for Buddhist doctrine, they would start with the five aggregates; move quickly to the three characteristics, and *then* get to the four noble truths. In other words, they started with a picture of reality—reality is composed of aggregates, and the aggregates are marked by the three characteristics. The message of that picture of reality was that reality is pretty much out of your control. It's not worthwhile trying to exert control over it. That attitude has permeated a lot of Buddhist practice ever since.

But when the Buddha introduced the four noble truths, he didn't start with a principle of reality. In fact, there are passages in the Canon that make fun of teachers who, when you ask them a question about what's worth doing in life, will

start with: how many elements there are in the world, whether good and bad are social conventions or not. In other words, the start with a picture of reality, and then from that picture of reality, all too often the message is that human action is totally powerless.

The Buddha, though, started with the power of human action. His graduated discourse—his introduction to the four noble truths—starts not with principles of reality, but with actions. He talks about generosity, he talks about virtue, and the good that can come from doing these things—how you can make your life a better life when you practice these things. Of course, he's going to get to the point where the goodness of just virtue and generosity has its limitations, but even then, he doesn't tell you to just give up on action.

When he then teaches the four noble truths, the most important part of the four noble truths is the path: a path of action that will lead to the end of action.

But it *is* a path of action: It's instructions on how you make things better, how you take that desire for things to be different and you don't snuff it out. You train it. You realize that simply wishing for things to be different is not going to get you there. But it can motivate you to do the things that will get you there.

One of the definitions of suffering is not getting what you want: in other words, being born and not wanting to die. You can't get that simply by wishing. But there is a path—the path of virtue, the path of concentration, the path of discernment—that will get you where you want to go. It'll take you to a different place from where you are right now, a place where there is no death because there's no birth.

What's important is that you can make a difference, and you shouldn't try to deny your desire to make a difference or for things to be different. Instead, simply learn how to train that desire. After all, that kind of desire is one of the bases of success; it's part of right effort. And with each of the skills you learn on the path, you find that you really *can* make a difference.

Now again, you do run in to limitations. Ajaan Lee couldn't make himself live forever. During his eight remaining years, he had heart trouble again, and again. For a few years he was able to pull himself together. There came a point, though, when he couldn't, but then he had other things that were more important than he

could do.

Which means when you start thinking about equanimity, remember the Buddha's pattern for teaching equanimity. You don't just go straight to equanimity. Think of those different lists that talk about developing equanimity: You develop equanimity through insight. You develop equanimity through concentration. You develop equanimity as part of the *brahmavihāras*.

Equanimity comes *after* you've made a difference in your mind, after you've found a sense of well-being, that potential for well-being in each of those activities. The equanimity of insight comes after the joy of insight. You gain insight to things that have been burdening the mind, and you realize that you don't have to carry those burdens. There's a joy that comes with that.

The equanimity of concentration: First you go through the first and second and third jhānas—rapture, pleasure, more rapture, more pleasure. Pleasure gets more and more refined.

And then the brahmavihāras: a sense of well-being that comes from goodwill, compassion, empathetic joy, when you realize that you don't mean ill to anybody at all. Your heart is wide. You have compassion for all beings, including those who have harmed you. You have empathetic joy for others, with no sense of narrow resentment. The heart finds joy as it gets more and more expansive.

Then you develop equanimity, because after all, no matter how much you wish for all beings to be happy, it's not going to happen. There does come a point where you have to say, "Well, that's as far as I can go in that direction," but you've gone far already.

The same with the practice of concentration: You stop the directed thought and evaluation when you realize that no matter how much more you talk to yourself about the breath, it's not going to get any better. It's good enough as it is, so you settle in. Then you find that the rapture that comes from settling in like that becomes oppressive. It's too strong. You want something that's better, something more refined. So you drop the rapture.

You get the mind to just the pleasure of a concentrated mind: the pleasure in the body, equanimity in the mind. Then you find that even the need to breathe in and breathe out feels oppressive. Your sensitivities have been heightened at that

point, so you allow the body just to be there. Because your awareness fills the body, breath energy fills the body, and the mind is very still, the body doesn't need to breathe. And you don't have to force it.

So you come to equanimity with a sense of fullness. If you go straight to equanimity before you've done anything, it becomes defeatist. Equanimity has to follow on joy for it to be the large-hearted equanimity that's a good part of the path. And you see that it too has its limitations.

This has been the pattern all along. You saw the limitations of generosity and virtue; now you begin to see the limitations of concentration. But, if things stopped there, it would be like the Serenity Prayer, "May I have the courage to change what I can change, the patience to accept what I can't, and the wisdom to tell the difference."

But there's more. When you take the powers of discernment you've developed as you've been getting the mind to settle down and you've gained an understanding of the mind—its tendency to run off to hindrances, and how you can put a stop to that tendency, and then all the processes that go into creating this state of concentration, developing the potentials you have in the breath, in the body, in the mind, in your perceptions—then you begin to see: "Oh, this, too, is fabricated. This, too, has its limitations. Is there something better?" And the Buddha's answer is Yes.

And you find that opportunity within yourself. That's when you realize that the practice is not just running up to limitations and accepting them. You've seen where the limitations are everywhere else in the world, and that funnels your interest into the deathless, because prior to that, the mind seems to want to do anything else, go anywhere else, but to the deathless.

So you've got to show it that there are going to be limitations no matter where you go. Even the good things you do with generosity, virtue, concentration, and discernment have their limitations. Maybe it's time that you open up to the possibility of something better. So the Buddha's steering you in this direction.

You learn to accept these limitations because you're going to go to someplace that's unlimited.

That's the message from the beginning, all the way through to the end: the

power of your actions, the power of human action based on that desire for things to be different. You don't snuff out the desire. You don't deny it. You learn how to make it skillful. You learn how to focus it on skillful actions. And you pursue the different skills of generosity, virtue, concentration, and discernment to see how far they can take you.

As in that image of the relay chariots: The first one can't take you all the way, but it can deliver you to the next one, which can take you further to the next one, which can deliver you to the next one, which can take you even further. You don't stop with equanimity, because you see that it, too, is fabricated, and there must be something better. You finally reach the chariot that takes you to where you want to go, a place with no limitations at all.

It's the end of desire. It's the end of wanting things to be different—not because you've told yourself that it's a bad desire, but because you've gotten to a place that is totally satisfactory and couldn't be improved if it were different.

I saw recently someone quoting Ajaan Mahā Boowa saying that, “Nibbāna is a place of enough.” Their idea was that they were going to teach people that to have a sense of enough would take them to nibbāna right now.

That's not what it's all about. When you get to nibbāna, things are enough because they really *are* enough—because you've made a difference.

You've seen how far desire can take you—it can deliver you to the threshold of where you want to go.

So don't look down on desire. That was another one of Ajaan Lee's lessons: It's because of our desire to practice, our desire for true happiness, that we're going to be able to find it. Just take that desire seriously. It's going to require skill, many skills, but they're skills that we can all develop.