

## *The Best Work Around*

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Bring the mind to the breath in a friendly way. If you treat the meditation as a war, the mind is going to fight, but if you treat it as a process of creating friendship—developing a friendly relation with the present moment—the mind will soften into the present moment and be a lot more willing to settle in to make itself comfortable, to make itself at home.

The sense of comfort is really important because there's so much difficult work that has to be done. There has to be a sense of well-being to strengthen the mind to keep it going. If it doesn't have that sense of strength, that sense of well-being, then when it runs into defilements, when it runs into problems here in the present moment, it's going to run away. It's not going to want to deal with these things. But if you come at the issues in the mind with a sense of strong well-being, a sense of being really stable and at home—friends with the breath, friends with the present moment—then you can face the issues in the mind with a lot more confidence. So this foundation is very important.

One of Ajaan Fuang's students once complained that she had been meditating a couple years, and all he was teaching her was concentration. She was impatient to get on to the next step. He told her, "Look, it's as if you're building a very tall building here. The foundation has to be solid. If the foundation isn't solid, then when you build one or two stories, the whole thing collapses. If the foundation is really solid, though, then it doesn't matter how many stories you build. They won't fall down."

So this work on the foundation is important. It requires a lot of care, a lot of skill, a lot of dedication, but think of the alternative—an unstable mind, an unbalanced mind, a mind with no foundation. Is that what you want? There's only one way you can gain a stable mind, and that's by doing the work, by being willing to train the mind.

The training here isn't so much reading and thinking about things. It's more a matter of actually developing qualities of mind through working with it. It's a matter of character building. A lot of character building comes from doing things

you don't want to do, but learning how to make yourself *want* to do them. It's that quality of *chanda*: desire in the practice, inclining yourself to do things that sometimes seem very hard but—as you contemplate the alternatives and think of the good results that are going to come from buckling down and doing the practice—you get a sense of encouragement. It becomes something you really do want to do. The obstacles start to seeming smaller, smaller, and smaller.

Years back, when I was staying with Ajaan Fuang, there was a time when we were getting ready to consecrate a lot of amulets that we were going to put in the Buddha image. Someone suggested doing a nine-day and nine-night consecration ceremony, which nobody had ever heard of. Usually it's just an all-night affair and then you're done with it. Ajaan Fuang himself seemed kind of dubious about whether we should tackle nine days and nine nights, and for some reason I spoke up and said, "Yeah, let's do it." Later he credited me with the whole thing's having succeeded. It was just because of that sense of, "Yeah, let's do it," that the obstacles seemed small. And the same principle works in the practice—your willingness to have that, "Well, let's just do it," attitude.

I sound like a Nike commercial, but you just do it, along with the sense that it's something you really want to do. When you have that sense, then the obstacles just seem to melt away. Even when they still are difficult, you find ways around them. It's like the difference between two people lost in the forest. One person believes there's no way out. That person is never going to find any way out. He just gives up at the least little obstacle. But the person who believes, "Yes, there is a way out," has a good chance of finding the way out.

So that's the attitude you've got to have. There is a way out of all the sufferings that the mind suffers from, and all the stress and distress and despair and delusion and depression. All these other negative things in the mind: There is a way out of the them, and it's one of the best things you can do in life. When you have that kind of attitude, the difficulties in the practice start seeming easy, and when it's backed up by well-trained concentration, that gives the mind the added strength it needs so that it's not just empty bombast or false self-esteem, but something based on real strength.

So this is something we have to work on as we practice.

We keep coming back to the breath, working with the breath, to create that

kind of strength, to create the kind of well-being that really is solid, that can tackle obstacles, because look at what we've got to tackle: a lot of things that the mind likes most. As Ajaan Suwat once said, our problem is that we have our friendships backwards. We're friends with our craving; we take suffering as our enemy. We should turn that around and take suffering as our friend, because it teaches us a lot of lessons. We should regard craving as our enemy. Our desires, our likes—you have to watch out for those things.

It's not an easy task. Often the lessons we most have to learn in the practice are the ones we least want to learn, and there are only two ways around them. One is listening to the counsel of other people who—looking at us from the outside—can see what our problem is.

The second is through our own appropriate attention: asking discerning questions about our likes, questioning our assumptions.

Dogen once described the practice as, “dethinking your thinking.” In other words, it's not just that you stop thinking, it's that you question your attitudes, your assumptions about, “This is good and that's bad.” Well, look at what's actually appearing in the mind. Is it really what you thought it was? Look deeper. Learn how to question it using the appropriate questions. That's what appropriate attention means: finding a good question to ask about your assumptions and following it through, taking those assumptions apart.

These are the two factors that can open things up in the mind. As the Buddha said, these are the two things that are most helpful for awakeing: one is having an admirable friend—someone who is more advanced in the practice—and the other is our own appropriate attention. These two factors work together from the outside and from the inside, to help chip away at the assumptions, our likes, our dislikes, the things we want, the things we say we don't want. We have to look at them, be willing to step back from them, and see where they lead. Do they really take us where we want to go or just pile on more stress and suffering?

So work hard at this business of concentration, this work of concentration. The work comes down to two factors: mindfulness and alertness. As they get more developed, they turn into directed thought and evaluation. Mindfulness means keeping the breath in mind. Alertness means watching what's happening as it happens—and in particular, watching what you're doing while you're doing it.

It's like driving down the road. You learn lessons in Driver's Ed and then you have to remember them. As you're driving down the road, be alert to situations that you learned about. It's the same with the breath. You make up your mind you're going to stay with the breath and then you're alert to make sure you really do stay with the breath. Remind yourself of your original intention. Don't let it fall away. Don't be a traitor to yourself.

The combination of these two factors is what develops into the factors of jhana: directed thought and evaluation. Just keep bringing your mind back to the breath with greater consistency, greater precision, and at the same time start evaluating the breath. Be really alert to what's going on, adjusting it, fixing it so that it's just right, so that the mind does feel good there.

That's the work we do in our meditation—to create a sense of well-being in the present moment—and it's work that's worth doing. You find that as you get into it, it's not so much dealing with pain in the present moment. Your work starts getting involved in pleasure and even a sense of rapture: the energy that starts coming up as the mind finally starts to settle down with a sense of solidity right here. It's food for the mind that keeps it strong, that gives it the strength it's going to need to develop further strength—the strength of discernment, the strength of insight—that can start uprooting all those assumptions you've always left unquestioned.

You can step back from the habits of the mind that might've worked when you were a kid but just aren't working anymore—habits that say, “Well, this has to be this, and that has to be that.” Well, does it really have to be? Look at it. Take it apart. When you can do that, you find that the mind has even greater strength so that it doesn't need to depend on things you used to cling to, the things you used to take as its food and nourishment.

It gets to the point where it doesn't need anything outside anymore —“outside” here meaning any of the five khandhas, even thoughts and feelings inside the mind. It gets so that the mind doesn't need those, either, for the sake of its well-being.

It may not be easy work but it's the best work around.