

Looking Inward

September 15, 2003

We come to practice the Dhamma because we've seen that the real troubles in our lives don't come from outside. They come from within: our own lack of skill in dealing with things. The world may give us bad things to deal with, but we can make something good out of them. If we sit around waiting for the world to be good or wanting to go out and straighten out the world, we'd die first before everything got straightened out. There's a lot out there that doesn't want to be straightened out, especially not in line with our opinions. But if we turn around and look inside, we find that we can deal with the issue of why we're suffering, and deal with it successfully, because it comes from our own lack of skill.

Our experience of the present moment is actually composed of three things: input from past actions; our own present actions, our own present intentions; and then, finally, the results of our present intentions. All these three coming together shape our experience. We can't do too much about what comes from past actions. That's a given. That's the stuff coming in through your eyes, ears, nose, tongue, body, and mind. But what you do with it makes a big difference. It's like the difference between being a really good cook and a mediocre cook. A really good cook can take whatever's in the kitchen and make good food out of it. You open up the refrigerator, there's nothing in there but a head of cabbage, and you can make something really good out of it—if you're really good. If you're a mediocre cook, then the food comes out mediocre no matter what the ingredients.

So, when we look at life as a skill, we realize that the important thing is our own mastery of the skill. Once the skill is mastered, then it doesn't really matter what the raw materials we get.

This is why the Buddha said that the sign of a really wise person is seeing that it's important—essential—to train the mind. If you really want happiness, it has to come from training your own mind. This is why the practice of the Dhamma is a practice of looking inward, not looking outward. You look outward and all you see is other people's bad habits, other people's bad actions. Where does that get you? Nowhere at all. Turn around and look inside, and you'll realize that there's work to be done inside. This doesn't mean you're in the wrong or the other people are right, simply that your work is inside.

That's where we focus when we come to meditate. And what are you doing right now? Where is your mind right now, where is it focused? Ajaan Lee says that good meditation is composed of three things. One is the right intention: You

make up your mind you're going to stay with the breath for the hour. And the second is the right object: the breath. So—where is the breath right now? Where do you sense it? You may have some preconceived notions about where the breath comes in and where it goes out, but where do you actually sense it? What movement of the body do you detect that lets you know that now the breath is coming in, now the breath is going out? That's what you should focus on. If you want, you can add a meditation word to go along with it: *buddho*, which means "awake." *Bud-* with the in-breath, *-dho* with the out.

So that's the intention and the object. The third element is the right quality. In other words, you want your intention to be continuous and you want the object to be something pleasant. You have to work on that. In other words, you can view the breath-potential in the body as just that: a potential, something you can shape, something you can work with. And what are you going to do with it? How are you going to shape it? You're training to be a master craftsman here. What does a craftsman do with the breath? Nudge it a little bit. See what it feels like if you breathe a little bit longer, a little bit deeper, using different parts of the body to breathe. If you look carefully at the body, you'll notice that certain parts of the body do all the work of breathing, and other parts do no work at all. Neither side really benefits that way. You want to have as much of the body involved in the breathing as possible. So think of it as a whole body process: When the breath comes in, it goes all the way down to the feet; when it goes out, it goes out all over your skin, in every direction. Then allow it find a rhythm that feels just right.

What you've done is to take your raw materials here—just the breath-potential in the body—and make something out of it. And you keep at it. It's not that you do it once and you become a master; you have to do it again and again and again. The more often you do it, the more you notice how to make it more comfortable, how to make it more gratifying; if you're feeling sleepy, how to breathe in a way that wakes you up; if you're feeling tired, how to breathe in a way that gives you energy. If you're feeling tense, how do you breathe in a way that relaxes you? If you're consistently observant, you begin to notice these things.

This is how the simple process of breathing becomes a skill. You find that certain ways of breathing that are tight, constricted, and uncomfortable put the mind in a bad mood. When the mind is in a bad mood, it's going to go out and look for trouble. Basically, that's what it's doing: looking for trouble. But if you breathe in other ways, you find that the mind gets soothed, feels better inside. It's much less likely to go out looking for trouble. It likes being right here. This is why one of the signs of a good meditator is that you don't want to get involved in a lot

of issues. You realize that the real work, the really interesting work, is what lies inside.

There's a lot to be done here, a lot to be understood, a lot to be mastered, lots of skills to work on, lots of things to play with. That's an important part of learning any skill—the sense of play, that you enjoy doing it. If there's no enjoyment, it gets dry really quickly. And when it gets dry, it's like an engine without any lubricant: It starts to seize up, stops working. But if you can come at the meditation with an attitude of enjoyment—if you like playing around with the breath, seeing what can be done with the breath, liking to explore this potential in the body—you find that the skill gets developed almost effortlessly, almost painlessly.

You discover that you can really make a lot out of just the simple raw materials right here: a body, sitting here; the breath, coming in and going out; the mind that's thinking and aware—the mind's most basic functions: think, know. You think about the breath and you know the breath. Bring it all together. When you bring it all together, there are lots of possibilities. You gain a lot of inner strength, a sense of inner stability that you wouldn't have if the things were allowed to be scattered about. So try to bring these things together right here. Realize that if you're going to overcome the problem of suffering, you've got to overcome it right here: right where the body and mind meet at the breath.

So you work on those three component factors of your meditation: having the right object, which is the breath; having the right intention, which is to stay with the breath; and then the right quality that comes as you make the breath more and more comfortable, and let that sense of comfort spread to fill the entire body, so that your present awareness is more and more stable and doesn't go shifting out to other things.

This way, you find that looking inward becomes a lot more fascinating than looking outward—there's just a lot going on in here. The reason there doesn't seem to be very much here is because we haven't really paid attention here. We've been distracted by things outside. But now that we turn around and look inwardly—look inward consistently—we find there are lots of subtle things going on here, things that you can master, areas where you really can make a difference—where you can take the raw material that comes to you, moment to moment to moment, and really make something good out of it. You turn it into a path, a path that leads someplace: to the end of suffering. And right here is where it's done.