

A Gentle Touch

July 22, 2004

Give the mind a chance to settle down, and try to learn just the right amount of pressure to put on the breath to keep it there. For a lot of people, if you could take a picture of what they're doing to their mind as they're practicing concentration, it's as if they're strangling it, which is why the mind rebels. Other people are just barely touching it, so of course the mind wanders off.

The Canon has an image of holding a baby chick in your hand. If you squeeze the chick too much, it is going to die; if you hold it too loosely, it's going to fly away. So you have to be sensitive to what's just the right amount of pressure to place on the breath, to place on the body.

Actually, you can't place pressure on the breath. As soon as you do, you're not really focusing on the breath, you're focusing on the solid or the liquid parts of the body. The breath is something that flows back and forth or stays still, but you can't catch it. You can simply be aware of where it is. If you're putting pressure on the breath, it's usually a sign that you're putting pressure on the blood flow in your body. So if you find that happening, lighten up a bit. The breath is coming in, the breath is going out on its own, and all you have to do is keep tabs on it, maybe nudge it a little bit here, nudge it little bit there, but just that. Don't put a lot of pressure on it as you try to change it.

After all, you're trying to create a sense of ease here in the present moment, and you can't create ease with a heavy hand. You need a gentle touch but a firm touch, sticking with it. That's the trick. As Ajaan Fuang used to say, it's a small thing that you're doing here, but you have to do it continuously. The phrase works better in Thai because it's a pun. The word for small is *nit*, and the word for continually is *nit*, spelled in a different way, but pronounced the same way.

So it's a slight effort, a slight amount of pressure, but it's a pressure you can maintain continually over long periods of time. Just remind yourself: Here is the body, here is energy flowing around, energy flowing on the surface, energy flowing through the body, and you keep tabs on that fact.

What we're doing here is a willed process. Concentration is a willed phenomenon, it's intended, and often our problem is that when we will something, we tend to push too hard. We want results right away. We want the lights, we want the action right away. But concentration doesn't work like that. It's something you have to sidle up to, something you have to approach gently, one step at a time: just this breath. What can you do to be at ease with this breath?

What can you do to be at ease with the next breath? Sometimes it means adjusting the breath, sometimes it means just simply allowing the breath to be the way it is, without any interference. You're free to do it either way.

One of the nice things about the breath as a topic of meditation is that there's so much freedom here. Even if you were in jail, you'd still be free to breathe in whatever way you want, yet even as we walk around in full freedom, all too many of us mistreat the breath, forcing it this way, forcing it that way, subconsciously. One of the reasons Ajaan Lee has you work with the breath is to undo a lot of your subconscious misdirection of the breath and to bring it back to a state of normalcy. So try to learn this sensitive touch, this gentle touch, with just enough pressure to keep you with the breath, but not so heavy that you're beginning to imprison it.

The next step is to train yourself to be with the whole body as you do this. You can work up the whole body section by section, or just think *whole body*, and there you are. Again, this is something that varies from person to person, how quickly you can be aware of the fact that when you're breathing in, the whole body is involved. There is an energy flow. In some parts of the body, the energy is still. In other parts, the energy is flowing. Even still breath counts as breath energy. It's like a TV screen. Sometimes you see pictures flash across the screen, other times you get just the white noise. Either way, the electrodes are still firing, but in some cases there are shapes; in other cases, no shape at all.

It's the same with the breath. In some parts of the body, the breath energy has a shape, a flow. In other parts, it seems diffuse and still. But either way, it counts as breath. All you have to do is be aware of the whole body, this whole-body energy field, as you breathe in, as you breathe out.

Once you can maintain this awareness, the emphasis begins to switch from the breath toward the breath and the awareness, both together. Then you can allow the breath to settle, to quiet down. The in-and-out breathing gets calmer and calmer. Here again, you do this by allowing it to happen, not forcing it, not squeezing it. One of the best ways to allow it to happen is simply to allow your attention to be still.

You can work at this either from the way you deal with the breath, or the way you manage your awareness, direct your awareness, develop a certain quality of awareness, because we're dealing right at the point where the mind and the body meet. So you can approach it from either side, either from the quality of the awareness or the quality of the breath. Most likely, you'll find yourself switching back and forth between the two modes. This gives you a good safe harbor, a place where outside narratives don't have to come in, where the mind has something

else to do besides telling itself stories. If you're going to have a running commentary, have a running commentary on just what's happening with the mind and the breath right now.

Ajaan Lee talks about the activities of the mind, either wandering out or hovering around the present moment. They're basically the same activities. There's the mental chatter, there are feelings and perceptions, and they could either be directed outside, directed to the past, directed to the future, or the same process can be acting right here, hovering around here. It's in hovering around here that you bring your awareness where it really ought to be, because if you want to understand how you shape your life, it's being shaped right here. So pay attention to the feelings and perceptions and the thoughts that hover around right here, right now.

Meditation is not a process of stopping thought right away. Just bring your thoughts to bear on what's happening right here, right now. To some people this is threatening. They're afraid of what's going on right here, right now, which is why we take the gentle approach, an indirect approach, to working with the breath, keeping it gentle. This allows things to come up in the mind in a non-threatening way. At the same time, the solidity of the concentration, or the continuity of the concentration, gives you a way to allow these things to come up without your getting involved. You have a more objective way of looking at them simply as events: This event happens in the mind; that event happens in the mind. There's a certain amount of attachment even though you're right there, and again the gentle touch is important.

As we were saying this afternoon, of these hardened shells around the heart, and many people literally tense around the heart area of the body, sometimes around the neck and shoulders, where you're holding all kinds of emotions, all kinds of issues. If you try to come barging in to straighten them out, the shells harden up. It's only if you start treating them gently that they begin to loosen up, soften up a little bit, and things come out. They come out in a setting where you can deal with them. You're not threatened by them; they're not threatened by you. That's how a lot of these issues can be resolved.

What you come to see as you meditate ultimately is the mind's own abuse of itself, its own mistreatment of itself, causing itself to suffer in ways that it doesn't have to. A lot of these lessons are things we don't want to learn, which is why we have to put the mind in a relaxed, calm, steady state, with a sense of well-being, a sense of ease and a sense of fullness that comes from the stillness. It's in this context that the issues can come up and you don't feel threatened by them. You have the strength and resilience to deal with them.

It's like a person who's well fed. When people are well fed, well rested, you can talk to them about all kinds of things as opposed to when they're tired and hungry. When they're tired and hungry, and you criticize them the least little bit, they snap right back. But if you get them at the right time when they're basically in a good mood, you can discuss almost anything, and issues that ordinarily would seem impossible can easily get resolved.

So it is with insight. We come to see how the mind causes itself suffering, we come to see how the mind is stupid, how it's ignorant—all of which are things we don't really like to see, but the cure of the mind requires that we see these things to be able to deal with them, to sort them out. So we develop a state of concentration for these purposes. This is how the Buddha determined what was right concentration, what was wrong concentration. Right concentration is the kind of concentration in which you can do these things. Wrong concentration either blots things out so that you can't see anything, or it lacks the sense of ease and well-being that give you the foundation you need for dealing with difficult issues.

So when the Buddha talks about right concentration, the rightness is for the purpose of gaining insight into the mind and resolving a lot of the issues we've been carrying around. That requires a state of mind that's all-around, with as few hidden spots as possible and with a sensitive touch. If you're going to deal with the mind, you need to have a very gentle, sensitive touch.

That's why we work with the breath, because the breath is, next to the mind, the most sensitive thing there is. If you barge your way into the breath, either confining it or forcing it this way or that, you're going to lack the gentle touch you need to work with things. So first you practice with the breath and then you turn around and apply your improved sensitivity to just be with awareness, noticing how things stir the awareness, what they do, how things get formed.

So try to work on this gentle touch, the touch that finds a balance between desire and awareness, that allows concentration and insight to come together. After all, the concentration is willed, but we need a certain amount of openness in this willed state so that we can see what's going on. We need enough desire to keep us here, but not so much desire that it's getting in the way. All of this requires sensitivity.

As Ajaan Fuang once pointed out, the texts say that breath meditation is for everybody; but, he said, it's only for people who can learn to be sensitive.

So to develop your sensitivity, keep focused on each breath, one at a time. Don't worry about how you want to force it this way, force it that way. Just figure out some way that you can relate comfortably to each breath as it happens. That

pulls you more and more to the present moment comfortably, which is right where you want to be.