

## *Self-Hatred*

*December 22, 2005*

We meditate to put an end to suffering, and specifically to the suffering caused by our minds—craving, ignorance, things that come up from within. Which means that you have to keep watch within, on what's going on inside. One of the purposes of meditation is to put you in a good place to watch, so that what you see is undistorted. You see what's actually there.

This means, one, you have to be steady. Keep the mind continually with the breath. Try to catch it at any time it's going to wander off. This is why we have one object to focus on. If you find one object not enough, give yourself two objects in the present moment. You can focus on the breath in two different parts of the body at the same time. That pretty much ties up your hands. You can't go running off someplace else. You've got two things you've got to be very watchful about. The important thing is that you stay right here in the present moment, and not go sliding off to the past or the future.

This is one of the reasons why we're trying to make the breath as comfortable as possible: so that you're less likely slide. But you also have to develop a full-body awareness, so that your gaze is all around. That makes it more solid. It can happen that when the breath gets comfortable and your awareness is small, you tend to drift off. Things get comfortable and easy, and you just let go. You come back a while later and wonder: Where was I? Was I asleep? Well, not really asleep. But where was I? It's hard to tell. Even though the mind may be quiet, it's not clear. It's not alert.

So to keep it alert, as soon as the breath gets comfortable, think of that sense of comfort spreading out throughout the body, through any channel, any pore, any way it can spread, until you feel that it's filling the body. You're almost drowning in good breath energy.

Then you try to maintain that. It's this quality of alertness that allows you to see. It's steady and it's all around. This way, you can catch any movements of the mind. The more you get to know the mind, the more you realize that it's not just stuff going on in the brain. Thoughts are often related to patterns of tension associated with different parts of the body. A lot has been written about how the body contains a lot of memories. They've sometimes found in organ transplants that memories of the organ donor start popping up in the mind of the person receiving the organ. Things get imprinted there in the organ. So when a memory gets stirred up, if you want to really see it happening all the way back to the very

beginning of the stirring of the memory, you've got to be aware of the body all around.

That's a kind of awareness you want to develop: clear, steady, all-encompassing. The things you see as you develop that kind of awareness get more and more reliable. That's the method to put yourself in a good spot to see.

Then it's your choice as to how much you're willing to admit about what you see. This is where meditation is more than just a technique or a method. Values play a role here as well.

I noticed when I spent my first year with Ajaan Fuang after reordaining, I felt frustrated with myself because there were times when I couldn't focus on the breath because old issues were popping up: from school, from when I was a child, when I was a teenager. It took me a while to realize that, actually, some important work was going on. I had picked up a lot of attitudes from my upbringing, and I had to sort through them to see which ones were actually going to be helpful in the meditation and which ones were not.

That process of sorting through was an essential part of the meditation itself. We have this inbred difficulty of looking at our own actions, but that's precisely what the meditation is: looking at your own actions. It's not so much self-purification as action-purification. It requires that you see your intentions and the actions and their results. Often these are things we don't like to look at. Sometimes it's just simple dishonesty. Other times we don't like to look at these things because we don't know how to handle what we see. How can you look at your mistakes without getting all tangled up in self-hatred, self-frustration?

This is where the right attitudes come in. Look at those instructions the Buddha gave to Rahula. He said that when you see an action that you've done has caused harm, you should feel shame and loathing—not shame and loathing for yourself, shame and loathing for the action. That's an important distinction. Shame around the action means that you realize you're a better person than that. You shouldn't have done it. It doesn't mean that you're a bad person. If you don't feel shame for actions like that, there's a problem.

But he also says you shouldn't get tied up in remorse. Notice a mistake, realize it was a mistake, and then resolve not to repeat it. That's all you can do as a human being immersed in time. You can't go back and change the action. And you can't compensate for the action by beating yourself up in the present moment.

This is where a lot of us have problems. We may have picked up this attitude from our families or our surroundings. It's hard to say nowadays what kind of culture American culture is, but when many of us grew up, it was a guilt culture. Somehow we feel that feelings of guilt are who we really are. It's where we sense

ourselves most intently. There's a rightness about feeling guilty, about feeling miserable. When we feel well, it doesn't feel true. It doesn't feel real. That's an attitude you've got to unlearn.

In the beginning, it doesn't mean that you wipe the attitude out, just that you notice when it comes and you try not to identify with it. Tell yourself, "This is a feeling, this is an attitude that's come up. Exactly how useful is it?" Well, watch it. See it as a process of cause and effect, in and of itself. Especially the long string of comments that comes along with an attitude: "I'm a horrible person. I'm a miserable person. I'm a no-good person"—whatever comes up. Learn how to listen to those voices without siding with them, without believing them. Just notice, this is what happens when you cultivate this attitude. This is all the self-destructive stuff that comes along with it. And it's not necessarily true. Certainly not helpful.

And you don't have to identify with these things. You don't have to believe the remarks of self-hatred any more than you have to believe any overestimation of yourself. In fact, it's best if you get the ideas of "self" out of the picture entirely, leaving just the question of action purification: training your actions, developing your actions in the right direction right now. If you can see things in that way, the entire issue of "you" becomes less involved. The unskillful thought patterns that go along with the sense of "you" don't have to grip you so tightly—because you don't have to grip them.

So remember: As we're meditating, it's not just a technique. The technique is important, but the values that go along with the technique are important to learn as well. Often this involves unlearning a lot of unskillful values you've picked up from your background. This is a problem not just in America, where we have a guilt culture. It's a problem in every culture. After all, we're learning the culture of the noble ones, which is different from the culture of any country.

So the basic principle applies all over: Whatever your background, there are going to be some things you have to unlearn, whether it's self-hatred or guilt or a tendency to overestimate yourself. Wherever the issue of "self" comes in, you have to put up a little question mark. How useful is that particular sense of self right now? Remember, you have lots of different senses of self that you can choose from. Is this the right one to help you right now? Or is it better to just let any sense of self go at this point, so that you can simply watch actions, intentions, actions and their results simply as events? The closer you can get to seeing things in those terms, the closer you are to the culture of the noble ones, and the more likely the meditation will start giving good results.