

Different Minds, Different Bodies

September 3, 2006

Each time you meditate, remember you're bringing a different mind to the session. It may not be the same mind you brought to your last session. And you're bringing in a different body, too. In other words, the state of the mind and the state of the body can change over time, sometimes quite radically in the course of a few hours. An important part of the skill of meditation is learning to read where you are when you sit down. What kind of issues are you carrying with you, both physically and mentally? You can bring in a tired body, a tense body, a sick body, or a healthy body. The way you work with the breath will have to depend on where you are, what you need in order to, say, give yourself a sense of relaxation when you feel tense in different parts the body, or to energize yourself when you're feeling tired, or to work with a pain that may be caused by poor blood flow in some part of the body or just a general feeling of malaise, where you simply don't feel right. How can you work with the breath to deal with that, to overcome it, to compensate for it?

These are important skills in meditation. You can't sit down and hope that each time you meditate, you'll do the same steps the same way and get the same results. You come in with different raw materials, especially when you're dealing with the mind. Sometimes you bring a really hyper mind into the practice and you've to do what you can to calm it down. At other times, the mind is sluggish. Or you've got a particular issue you're dealing with, carried over from something somebody said in the course of day, or something you did in the course of the day. All these are things you've got to learn how to compensate for. That's part of the skill of the meditation.

Sometimes, when the mind is really antsy, the more you try to tie it down, the more it rebels, in which case you've got to say, "Okay, now the mind wants to think, so I'll give it something to think about." You can survey all the really subtle aspects of the breath energy in the body, make a catalogue on how everything is, starting from the end joint of your little finger, and going through the body very minutely, very precisely. Or you can switch over to the bones. Where are your bones right now? It's a good thing to think about. We've got a skeleton sitting right here inside our flesh. Where are the different parts of the skeleton? Go through them all, making catalogue, starting with the first joints in your fingers or toes. Visualize all the little bones that you can remember from biology class or anatomy class. Ask yourself, where is the toe bone right now? Locate it. Try to

relax all the muscles around that bone, and then move on to the various bones in your feet, up your legs, up through the pelvis, up the back, the rib cage, the neck, the skull, then out to your arms.

In other words, if the mind has a lot of energy and it's not willing to settle down, give it work to do. After a while, after it's done its work, it'll feel tired and want to settle down. Then you can work with the breath in one spot.

Other times, the mind is sluggish, and you've got to learn how to wake it up. Here again, going through that catalogue of the different parts the body is a useful way to get it stirring.

Or you can move your attention around. Once, when Ajaan Fuang was really sick, we had to set up a schedule for the monks to look after him. The other monks in the monastery were very quick to find other duties they had to do, and I ended up doing the 2 a.m. to 8 p.m. shift. I usually found around 3 a.m. that I became really sleepy. Yet I didn't want to fall asleep.

Ajaan Fuang had once commented on some monks who had been looking after him when he was really sick. One night he woke up in the middle of the night. All the monks who were supposed to be looking after were asleep. He was the only one awake. The question popped into his mind: Who's looking after whom here?

I wanted to be very careful that he didn't tell that story about me. So I tried to sit and meditate and found myself dozing off, until I found that one way of keeping myself awake was to move my attention around: two breaths here, then focus the awareness on another spot in the body, two breaths there, and then just keep moving it around, top to bottom, top to bottom, here and there. After I got over that phase of sleepiness, then I got the mind to settle down and just stayed in one spot.

So that's another way of dealing with sleepiness or drowsy sluggish mind. Do something to wake it up.

As for specific issues that you bring into the meditation, sometimes you have to put the breath aside if the mind isn't willing to stay with the breath. Directly focus on what it is that's got the mind all stirred up. Is it lust? Is it anger? Is it greed? Regret? Discouragement? There are lots of different emotions that can come and get in the way. Then use whatever antidote there is for that particular emotion, that particular defilement of the mind. We have that chant on the 32 parts the body to help you with lust and the chant on goodwill to deal with anger.

Actually, there are lots of tools to use for anger. Sometimes you have trouble feeling goodwill for the other person, but at the very least try to have some goodwill for yourself. There's that fine passage in the Canon where the Buddha

says to remind yourself that if you give in to your anger and start acting on it, you're going to do precisely the sort of thing that an enemy would be happy to see you do. You look ugly when you're angry. You destroy your property, destroy your friendships. You get all confused as to what's going to be to your advantage and what's not going to be to your advantage. You have trouble sleeping at night. If you are having goodwill for yourself, you wouldn't do these things.

So that's where you start: goodwill for yourself. Then, after you've settled down and dealt with that issue, you can start thinking goodwill for other people.

When you're feeling lazy and sluggish, you can contemplate death. Death could come at any time. Are you ready to go? If not, what have you got to do? You've got to get your mind in good shape. That's the first priority. So focus on that. When you think in this way, it helps incline you to be willing to meditate.

In other words, learn how to read your mind, see where it's off balance, and then do what you can to bring it back into balance. Sometimes the breath can do that for you; other times, you have to drop the breath for the time being and work on other issues that will finally bring you back to the point where you're willing to take on the breath.

Even when the mind settles down with the breath, it's going to settle down in different ways. The descriptions of jhana make it sound as if you're locked into a particular state that's always going to be the same every time you hit it. But that's not always the case. Sometimes there'll be a great sense of bliss, a great sense of rapture; other times it'll be much milder. Sometimes a sense of ease is very compelling, and sometimes not so compelling. Sometimes your focus is really one-pointed, other times more expansive. The important thing is that you stay with your meditation. Realize that the concentrated mind has its variations as well. As long as you're with your object—you can stay absorbed with the breath and stick with your original intention—then you're doing what's required. Whether there's a great feeling of ease or just a slight feeling of ease will depend on your physical condition, on the condition of your mind, and also on how that sense of ease relates to the really sensitive parts the body and the mind.

You'll find as you get more and more familiar with the territory of your body, there are some parts the body that are really sensitive, that really have an impact on the mind. There are others that are more peripheral. Sometimes it's a lot easier to get the peripheral areas relaxed, yet that central part may still be tight or closed, in which case you focus on all the areas around it. Don't attack it directly. Work on loosening up all the other areas around it, and then maybe once everything else gets loosened up and easeful, then that ease starts seeping into the more sensitive parts of the body, especially the ones that are in the central core of your torso,

around the heart and the chest and the throat, in your gut and the middle of the head. When you can get those parts to open up and develop a sense of fullness and ease, it becomes a lot more compelling.

So remember, there are variations in the raw material you bring to the meditation each time you sit down, which will require variations in the techniques, variations in your approach. But this is a basic principle with any skill. Sometimes, when you get broccoli out of the refrigerator, it's nice and fresh. Other times it's not so fresh. What do you do with fresh broccoli that's different from not-so-fresh broccoli? If you're a good cook, you learn. You learn to deal with whatever variations there are. That means your skill is more all-around.

The same with your meditation: You want to make it all-around. You want to learn the skill so that it's not something you do just while you're sitting here with your eyes closed under very quiet conditions. You want to take it out into all sorts of conditions so that you can keep the mind centered no matter what. That means even more variations in the environment, more variations in what you have to learn to deal with.

So learn to get good at the variations of your own mind: how to read the mind, how to counteract any unskillful thoughts that are coming up, how to bring it into balance no matter where it's getting tipped—forward or back, left, right, or whatever. Take that in stride as part of learning the skill of meditation. That means you learn how to translate your skill into all sorts of situations, so that you can do it whenever you need it. And you come to realize that the different states of concentration you're going to gain all have their different uses. So whether it's the precisely the type of concentration you'd like to get or not, that's not the issue, or shouldn't be the issue. The issue should be, once you've got the mind concentrated in this way, what can you do with it? What's it good for? That's when the skill of the meditation shows its real importance as you gain a greater sense of its range.