

Animals in the Mind

May 27, 2009

As we sit here focusing on the breath, we're developing what's called mindfulness immersed in the body. You keep the body in mind and you try to fill the body with your awareness, allowing your awareness to spread out and be filled with body. Don't squeeze off your awareness of the body, which is something we normally do an awful lot. Usually, when we focus on something we're looking at, something we're hearing, we blot out our awareness of the body to focus on the sight or the sound or whatever else the sensory input might be. So as you focus on the breath, you're trying to reopen that awareness of the body, work your awareness through the body, be aware of the body as an interconnected whole. Your head is connected to your torso, your torso is connected to your arms, lower torso is connected with your legs. Things are not cut off. The whole body breathes in together, breathes out together.

When you do this, you're giving the body your full attention. And when you give your full attention of the body, you provide a good solid foundation for the mind. It becomes your place. When you fully inhabit your body, nobody else can invade your space. And you have a good leash for the mind.

There's an image in the texts of six different animals, all leashed together. There's a crocodile that wants to go down in the water. There's a monkey that wants to climb up into a tree. There's a hyena that wants to go into the charnel ground to feed on a couple of good corpses. There's a dog, a snake, and a bird, all of them heading off in different directions. What happens, of course, is that whichever of the animals is the strongest, that's the direction they all get dragged. The six animals here are symbols for the different senses: the things you want to look at, the things you want to listen to, the things you want to smell, the things you want a taste, touch, think about. Wherever the desire or the impulse is strongest, that's where you drag your mind.

Whereas if you're practicing mindfulness immersed in the body, it's like taking all the six animals and tying them to a stake. The stake is strong. No matter how strong the animals are, the stake is stronger, so they end up staying right next to the stake instead of getting pulled off into the river or up into the trees or into the charnel ground.

That stake is your space. You want to make sure your space doesn't get invaded and doesn't move off away from the body. Because often, if it's moved off from the body, it's like something is tipping over. You've left your home. You've left your

home base. You've left your place of security. The things that happen up there in the trees, in the river, in the charnel ground can get you into a lot of trouble. If you're feeding on those things, you get pulled all out of whack, because this sight appeals to you, that sight doesn't appeal to you; this sound appeals to you, that sound doesn't appeal to you—and all the way down the line. But the fault doesn't really lie with the sights or the sounds. It lies with the impulses of the mind that just want to go flowing out, running out after these things.

That's how you create a bridge from your sensory input into the mind, where that input can do a lot of damage to the mind. As we've seen, the impulses that come from outside, if you take them in, can do a lot of damage. You feel like you're being assaulted. But what's actually happening is that you've opened the door. You've created a bridge for these things to come in. You've abandoned your space and you've left the doors open and actually gone out and dragged a few things into the house, so of course these things are going to wreak a lot of havoc. You have to tell yourself, "This is my space right here in the body. This is where I belong. No one else needs to come here." When you stay in your space, you're in a much safer position.

There's another image in the Canon: the story about a quail who ordinarily lives in a field where it's safe because it can hide behind clods of dirt, it can hide behind rocks, so that the hawk can't catch it. But when it goes away from the field out into the open, the hawk can swoop down and catch it. In this one case, that's happened: The hawk has swooped down on the quail and is carrying it off. The quail says, "Ah, it's just my lack of good luck merit that I was caught when I was away from my ancestral territory. If I had been in my ancestral territory, this hawk would have been no match for me. The hawk gets piqued and asks, "What is your ancestral territory?" The quail says, "A field with the clods and the stones turned up by the plow. If I'd been there, you couldn't have caught me."

The hawk takes this as a challenge so he lets the quail go. He says, "Go ahead, go back there, but you're not going to escape me." So the quail flies down to the field and stands on a stone turned up in the field. He says, "Okay, come on and get me, you hawk! Come on and get me, you hawk!" The hawk swoops down, but this time, the quail—just as a hawk is about to get him—darts behind the stone. The hawk crashes his breast into stone and dies. The Buddha's lesson: If you stay in your territory, you're safe, like the quail in its field where the hawk can't get him.

So try to inhabit your body as much as possible. If you leave the body and allow your attention to go flowing out after things outside or thoughts of the past and thoughts of the future, remember that if you leave your space, you're in danger. If you stay in your space, you're okay. You begin to see to what extent

things outside come invading your space, and to what extent you're flowing out after them. It's the flowing out that causes the real problem. But to see that clearly, you not only have to have your space, but you also have to have a sense of protection. We talked today about creating a sense of energy shield around your body and mind right here in the present moment, using the breath and your alertness to create that shield. Try to be sensitive to when things outside invade and have a sense that you can repel them.

It's like a turtle. The turtle's body is very sensitive, very tender, so it needs a hard shell in order to stay alive. Meditators are like turtles. As you meditate, you get more and more sensitive to things, what's going on in the present moment. Especially as you stay with the breath like this, parts of you seem to be more open, exposed than they were before. So you've got to compensate for that by creating a sense of the breath shield. As long as you're with the breath, think of sensory contacts as something happening outside. Things come, and they slide off your shield, slide around you, don't come in to invade your heart. Actually, they don't do the invading. You're the one that opens up and allows them in. Of course, you're going to hear things, see things, and smell things, but the extent to which you let them invade you, that's something *you* do. That's part of your intention. It's become such a habitual intention that you hardly even notice it.

Sometimes you go running out after things because you like them; sometimes you go running after them because you don't like them. You've got to develop a strong sense that this is where you belong, whereas out there is out there. You can know about things out there as much as you need without running out after them. When you run after them, you're actually feeding on them, feeding on them out of lust, out of anger, out of possessiveness, out of pride, whatever the motivation might be. But as you feed on them, you're exposed like any animal while it's feeding. Animals know that when they're feeding, they're in the most exposed state, so they tend to be very wary while they eat. We may not like to think about the fact we have to be very wary even among people we trust, among people we love, still it's true. We have to have a strong sense of our space.

This is not selfish. After all, when you're secure in your space, you can see a lot more clearly what other people need, because you're not trying to feed off them. You've got your sense of nourishment, your sense of inner food right here with the breath, a sense of well-being, a sense of being settled, secure, as you stay in your space. This way, you create healthy boundaries. And as for your desire to help other people, the extent to which you can put your mind in good shape like this is a good example for them. If you want other people to practice, you have to let them see the benefits of the practice in your behavior. The fact that you're more

secure, less disturbed by events, less stirred up by things: When they see that, they'll want to practice of their own accord.

So as you're doing this, you're helping yourself and providing a good example for others. As Ajaan Suwat used to say, each of us has one person. You're responsible for yourself. You can't be responsible for other people, but you can provide a good example. This is what the Buddha did. He showed that a human being can, through his or her own efforts, find freedom from suffering. He didn't go out and release people from their suffering, but he did show them that there's a way.

And that was enough. That opened people's minds to new possibilities. That in and of itself is quite a gift. Otherwise, we go through life thinking, "Well, this is as good as it gets. We might as well learn to content ourselves with fighting over what's out there."

The image the Buddha gave is of a pond that's gradually growing drier and drier, becoming just a puddle. The fish in the pond are fighting over what little water that's left. As long as you think that the only happiness in life lies getting that water, you're going to resign yourself to fighting for it. But if you realize that if you develop your sense of inner space like this, become more secure here, more solidly here throughout all kinds of events, all kinds of situations, reminding yourself that no matter where you go, you still have the breath, you still have the body, it's all right here: Then you can find happiness wherever you are. You don't have to fight other people, fight the other fish for that little bit of water remaining.

So the focus of the practice keeps coming back here, back here, back here. That way, you don't get distracted by thinking that the solution to your problems lies outside, because actually the causes of the problems don't lie outside. The causes are lying inside as well. You've got all these conflicting desires for happiness, all these different animals inside of you. In terms of another analogy, there's a big committee inside, and the members are all trying to pull in different directions. But if you can leash everybody here to the breath and say, "Here's where you're going to find your happiness," they may pull in different directions for a while, but if you stay right, you get to see everybody. Then you can converse with everybody, train everybody, negotiate. What every member of the committee—any animal—here in the mind wants is happiness, a sense of well-being. And in the beginning stages, you can provide that with the breath. As different members of the committee become more inclined to look here, you find that there are deeper and deeper levels of happiness that can be found right here, until ultimately

everybody's on the same page. So even though they may be tied to the body, there's freedom that comes from looking deeper inside.

So tell yourself, "This is my space. This is where I belong. I want to inhabit it fully, protect myself, protect others from my going out from the space to feed on them." This is how we live with one another in peace and harmony, because we're not invading one another's spaces. We learn we can find everything we need inside us, right here.