

Time to Heal

June 21, 2010

We come out to a place like this because it gives the mind a chance to look at itself without all of the distractions that get in the way when we're living with other people. Even though there *are* other people around here, our main purpose in being here is to take care of whatever duties we have to do in the course of the day, get them done so that we can each have time to be by ourselves to look into the mind. This is called physical seclusion.

And we have to be careful in our conversations with one another so that they don't get entangling. As the Buddha said, one of the ideal topics of conversation is unentanglement, the virtue of seclusion. So as we're working with one another, of course there has to be some discussion of the work we have to do. But try to keep the thought in the back of your mind that each of us is here for seclusion. And even though you may be hungering for a little bit of company, the people around you may be hungering to get away from you. So talk about what's necessary to talk about and then keep it clean, so that your conversation doesn't disturb your own seclusion and it doesn't disturb the seclusion of the people around you.

Because as it turns out, physical seclusion is not the big problem. Mental seclusion is. You can go and sit under a tree, be by yourself with nothing but the wind and the leaves and the few bugs here and there, but you find you have a whole committee sitting there with you—all these different voices saying, "Well, now we've got all this free time, we can think about *this*, we can talk about *that*." And they set up a huge discussion group. You want to learn how to cut through that as effectively as possible. Otherwise, your time gets eaten away, eaten away.

Or as Ajaan Fuang used to say, we just have lots of *times*. There's a time to think about *this* and there's a time to think about *that* and there's a time to do *this*. And the whole day gets divided up into little times, to the point where we don't have any time to really look at the mind, to gain some peace, to gain some healing. Because the mind when it's constantly eaten away – with its duties, with its responsibilities, all the various things that we occupy ourselves with – it really gets damaged by these things. Its strength gets sapped. All those little times offer lots of little entryways for greed, aversion, and delusion to slip into the mind and to infect it.

So here we want to have some time to sit down and be quiet and heal the mind. The breath helps. It feels good coming in, feels good going out. If it doesn't feel good coming in and coming out, you can ask yourself, "Well, why?" You've got the time and the opportunity to give total attention to your breathing. After all, the breath is the force of life, and if this force of life feels constricted, tight, strangled, it's going to have an impact on other areas of your life as well. So it's good to take time and notice: What kind of breathing feels really refreshing?—i.e., good all the way in, good all the way out. When you're feeling tense, what kind of breathing feels relaxing? When you're feeling tired, what kind of breathing lifts your energy?

When there are pains in different parts of the body, where do you focus the breath energy to help deal with those pains? For instance, sometimes there's a pain in your back. A good place to start is to focus on your stomach. If there's a pain in your right side, focus on the left side. Sometimes if you're feeling numb in your legs, it's actually because the breath isn't flowing well down the spine. So make a survey. Take the time to go through the body section-by-section, and offer what kind of healing is needed for each section.

I was reading a book once about a man who for some reason was upset with his spleen. He'd been told by his doctor that his spleen wasn't functioning properly, and so one night in exasperation he yelled at his spleen. A few days later he met a psychic woman who did a little check on him and said, "What are you doing, yelling at your spleen? You don't yell at your spleen!" It's working hard for you, you want to be nice to it. Give it some time, give it some space to get some good breath energy.

This principle applies to every section of the body. You'll find—if you've been carrying a lot of burdens, a lot of responsibilities around—that the breath energy in the body could use a lot of healing work. And you find that it gets really interesting. Here it is: your own body, and you've missed parts of it. As you learn how to direct the breath energy around, you find you really can get a sense of wholeness and healing.

A similar principle applies to the mind. If you're focusing outside all the time – helping this person, worried about that person – there's not much time for yourself, not much time to look after the mind itself. So it gets squeezed into weird shapes and parts of it get starved.

So here's a chance for your awareness to become all-around. You stay focused on the present moment, try to expand your awareness so that it fills the whole body. Think of the breath being all around you. You may notice that your awareness is focused in some areas but tends to block out other areas. Try to open up those blocked-out areas, and this simple awareness in the present moment will have a chance to develop energy to heal itself. As for any thoughts that would pull you away and say, "Oh, you've got to think about *this*, you've got to worry about *that*," remind yourself you don't have to right now.

I've told the story before but it's useful to hear it again: There was a woman who once came to stay and meditate at the monastery in Thailand. She was going to stay for two weeks, but after the second day she came to see Ajaan Fuang to say goodbye. She was going to go back home. And he asked her why. She said, "Well, I'm just worried about the people back home. Who's going to fix the food? Who's going to wash the clothes? Who's going to look after them?" He told her, "Tell yourself that you've died. One way or another, they'll be able to look after themselves." So she carried that thought around: As soon as any thought of home came up, she said, "Okay, you've died. You don't have to take on that responsibility." And she was able to stay for the two weeks.

In the same way, when you find thoughts of this sort coming up, just remind yourself: You've died. The world can take care of itself, the people in your life can handle themselves.

You're here to work on healing the mind. As for all those thoughts that dig into the mind and say, "You've got to worry about *this*, you've got to think about *that*, your past, future, whatever," just see them as disturbances in the present moment. All the oughts and the shoulds that they carry around: You don't have to listen to them. On one level it seems irresponsible, but on another it's not. Because it only stands to reason that if you get worn out from trying to keep up with your duties all the time, then there's less that you can do for other people.

So here's your chance to strengthen the mind and to give it a skill that's useful not only while you're here but also when you go back home. Because this is the whole point of coming out here: Physical seclusion helps you get in touch with mental seclusion – it gives you a chance to get in touch with the skills of the mind – but mental seclusion, when it's mastered, doesn't require physical seclusion to keep going. In other words, you can take these skills of dealing with the mind, dealing with the breath, and take them wherever you go. You can have that sense of mental seclusion even when you're surrounded by people, even when you're engaged in activities, helping this person or that. There can still be part of the mind that's looking after itself. And so the healing process is not something that has to wait until you're exhausted and then you go running off to hide in a little burrow. You can heal yourself as you deal with other people, you can heal yourself as you're doing other tasks, other responsibilities.

After all, the breath is coming in, going out, all the time. And whenever you notice that the breath feels constricted, it feels squeezed, just stop for a second and allow it to expand. Allow yourself to breathe comfortably. That way, you can heal yourself as you go through the day. When you find you have time to rest and time to be by yourself, then you can really go at it, give it your full attention.

So we want to work on this quality of allowing the mind to look after itself, give it some space so it can develop the skills it needs to tend to itself, to care for itself, realizing that this is not a selfish activity. It's necessary for your health and for the health of the people around you. If you give in to the diseases of greed, aversion, and delusion, you find that they're communicable. The more you give in to these diseases, the more the people around you are going to pick up the germs.

So try to make the most of this opportunity here. You've got physical seclusion so that you can turn inward and deal with all these chattering voices in your mind. Throw a few scraps to them here and there and they'll be quiet.

There was a time toward the end of Ajaan Fuang's life when one of the members of the royal family in Thailand was really misbehaving and was the object of a lot of gossip. Once Ajaan Fuang was in Bangkok and some of his students picked up this topic and started talking about it. He happened to have some candies with him, the kind of candies that you suck on, and so he threw candies to everybody—his purpose being as they were sucking on the candies they wouldn't be able to talk: They'd have something sweet and at the same time be quiet.

So as you're working with the breath, think of it that way: You've got these chattering voices, well, throw a little breath nice breath in their direction. That way, they'll be contented and keep quiet, so that you can do the work you need to do in dealing with the issues of the mind.