

A Post for the Mind

August 27, 2014

To be mindful of the body, you can focus on the breath. The Buddha compares it to a post for tying down the mind. In one case, he compares it to a post to which they tie an elephant. They've gotten the elephant out of the forest, out of the jungle, and they're bringing him into the city to train him. And the first thing they've got to do is get rid of his forest habits, so they tie him to the post.

Now, if they just tied him to the post, he'd spend his whole time rebelling, so they have to give him food. The food here, of course, when you're meditating, is the sense of well-being that you can create, first with the breath and then with the fact that the mind can stay settled down. This is one of the things that really strengthens the mind: when it gets an object it can stay with continually. In not jumping around, it doesn't use up a lot of energy, and that gradually develops into strength.

So to stay settled and be happy to stay settled, we bring in the breath. Try to get a sense of breath energy in the body—where it's lacking, where it's out of balance—and try to bring things into balance. Then protect it as much as you can. Lots of different things can harm it: energies coming from outside and energies coming from inside. If you let these other energies invade, the sense of nourishment and well-being that comes from the breath disappears. Then the mind is hungry. And what often happens when the mind is hungry is that it'll just grab anything it can.

It's like the coyotes around here. When you look at their scat, sometimes you find bits of plastic rope. You find all kinds of stuff. In other words, when they can't find anything good to put in their mouths, they just take whatever. Of course, it can't be good to have plastic rope going through your system. But the damage that does is much less than the things we take into our systems when the mind is hungry. We go out looking for sights, sounds, smells, and tactile sensations. We get fascinated by our sensual fantasies that can enflame the mind with greed, aversion, and delusion.

When the Buddha talks about the problem of sensuality, it's not that the objects out there that are the problem; it's our fascination with going over a particular sensual desire, making plans, making adjustments. There are not that many things that people get fascinated with in terms of sensuality, but they can go over them again and again and again. If you take a picture of the mind when it's

feeding like this, what kind of feeding would it look like? Pretty miserable. So it's important that you maintain this post here—and also feed the mind well.

The Buddha makes another analogy with a post. He says it's like having six different animals on leashes. If you tie the ends of the leashes together, and there's no post to which they're tied, then they'll just drag one another around. And who knows how far they'll go? The strongest one will drag the others behind it. In the Buddha's image, the strongest animal is the alligator, and it'll probably pull the bird and the dog and whatever down into the river, where they'll drown. But when you've got a post, you tie the ends of the leashes to the post. Then they'll pull and pull and pull, but eventually, they'll have to give up and lie down by the post because they can go only so far.

The six animals represent the six senses. As you go through the day, you want to make sure that you exert restraint over the senses. That's what tying the animals to leashes means. But you also use mindfulness of the body as the post. When you stay here with the body, you can see the energies moving in, the energies moving out, but you don't have to move with them. Ajaan Lee makes this point. He says discernment is what stays still as other things in the mind move. And you want to see these movements.

When you go out for something, why are you going? What impels the mind? If it's lust pulling you out, the Buddha first has you contemplate the object, but not in the way you'd ordinarily contemplate it. He has you contemplate it to see that it's not worth all the effort that goes into fantasizing about it. That's so that you can eventually drop the object of the lust and turn around to look at the lust in and of itself.

What is it like to have this movement in the mind? Where is it coming from? What kind of hunger are you trying to satisfy, and does it really satisfy the hunger? Or is it like those potato chips where they say, "I bet you can't eat just one"? The first one makes you hungry for the second one, the second for the third, the third for the fourth, and so on until you've finished the bag of chips. And then what have you got? A bloated feeling in your stomach, cholesterol in your system, high blood pressure: all the bad things that come from gorging yourself on potato chips. And is your hunger really satisfied? No.

So with this post you've got here, you want to make sure that the animals are well fed. In other words, you feed the mind in particular; that's the big one. If the mind is well fed with concentration, well fed with breath energy, and if you learn how to protect it, then you've got something good to feed on. Then when you see the other animals wanting to feed here or feed there, you ask yourself, "Where are you going? What are you going to gain from this?" And as long as the mind is well

fed, it'll be willing to do this kind of analysis. It's when it's really hungry that it says, "I don't care. I'm hungry," and goes running out.

This is why concentration is such an important part of the path. It's what gives you your energy to stay on board. And you're doing it in a healthy way. There are times when you can force yourself to stick with the path out of sheer determination, but that can go only so far. So try to find a way to breathe that makes you feel really full, even as you breathe out. Get a sense of the breath energy. Where does it feel depleted? Where does it feel lacking? Can you tell? Are you sensitive to this? Try to sensitize yourself to this area of your awareness, because it's where there's a lot of hunger.

The more you can create a sense of stillness—and the discernment that stays still as everything else moves—and the quicker you are to detect the movements, the more you begin to see. You get closer and closer to what's stirring the mind to go out, even when you've got this sense of well-being here. How does the mind get bored with it? What is it that wants change all the time? What lack is still there? Even when the body feels nourished and when most of the mind will feel nourished by the breath, there'll still be some part that's hungering for its old feeding habits.

It's only in this way that you get to see where the problem lies. As the ajaans are constantly saying, you start out the practice thinking that something outside is causing you anger, or something outside is causing you lust, or something is causing you jealousy. But then you realize those things aren't causing anything. The mind is looking for something to be angry about, or lustful about, or jealous about. Why is it looking for these things?

You have to turn around and look inside. You see that the troublemaker is in here. You're living with the troublemaker. Many times, you participate with the troublemaker. And you have to ask yourself: At what point will you decide that you've had enough?

When you side with the Dhamma, it offers you a way out. When you see the Dhamma as your friend, and you see it as a source of genuine nourishment, that's half the battle right there.