

Stepping Out of Yourself

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Take a couple of good, long, deep in-and-out breaths. Go all the way down through the torso. You can even imagine the breath going all the way down to your feet. Notice where you feel the breathing process most clearly. When we focus on the breath, that's what we're focusing on: the feeling of the process, and not so much the air coming in and out through the nose. As the breath gets very subtle, we reach a point where we can't feel the air, but there's still a movement of energy in the body.

So focus there and then ask yourself: Is it comfortable? Is it what your body needs right now? If you're feeling tired, what kind of breathing will give you more energy? If you're feeling tense, what kind of breathing will relax you? You can experiment with shorter breathing, deeper, more shallow, heavier, lighter, faster, slower. Breathe in a way that feels really good right now. Which parts of the body are very sensitive to the breathing process, in the sense that when you breathe in it feels good right there? Focus your attention there. See if you can maintain that sense of your sensitivity being satisfied.

It's an important part of the concentration to have a sensation that you focus on that feels really good: a place where the mind can settle in and feel really comfortable. You're going to need to stabilize the mind, and the mind won't be stable if it's not feeling a sense of pleasure. When it's unstable, it tries to feed on things: to feed on your emotions, feed on other people's words, feed on your image of yourself—all kinds of unhealthy things that the mind tends to feed on when it's dissatisfied, when it feels hungry.

So we're teaching ourselves to feed in a new way, to feed on the parts of the body that are sensitive to the breath, to make them satisfied. When you can do that, then you give the mind a place where it can step back from itself.

After all, if you're going to get past your own defilements, you have to be skeptical of them. Greed will tell you one thing, anger will tell you something else, delusion will tell you something else, sometimes they all get together and tell you the same thing, but they're all telling you things that may not be good for you. If those are the only voices you have in your mind, you tend to go with them.

Here we're giving you another voice, a voice that says, "Wait a minute. Are these things really true and beneficial, what they're telling you?" If you have a sense of well-being with the breath, it's a lot easier to step back and take that as your foundation, so that the hunger of your greed, the hunger of your aversion,

and the hunger of your delusion are not quite so strong. Then you can question them, these moods.

All too often we tell ourselves that this is what we really feel about something, and we want to get in touch with our emotions. That's because we've been estranged from them, and we somehow think that if we get to know them really well, then we can trust them. But no, they're just habits, like everything else that goes through the mind. Sometimes they're pretty bad habits, but they feel natural, they feel like they're us, because they're old, familiar habits. And we're addicted to them. Part of the addiction is in the sense that, one, there is some sort of gratification there. And two, there's a sense of compulsion—in other words, that you feel you *have* to do it that way.

Sometimes that sense of compulsion comes from a sense of duty that you have to think in a particular way, as when you're worried about things. You feel that if you don't worry enough, you're not prepared for the future. Sometimes the problem is a lack of imagination. You can't think of anything else to do when you're feeling particularly out of sorts. ill at ease, so you just go back to your old habits.

Well, the Buddha's teaching you some new habits.

The whole point of the practice is that the mind can change. We're talking about the mind here, not just about your thinking apparatus. It's the whole complex of what we call heart and mind—or psyche: our feelings and our thoughts. Actually, there's no clear line between feelings and thoughts. A feeling is basically a thought that's gotten into your body.

We're talking about emotions, not just the feeling tones that they call *vedana* in the technical Buddhist terminology. Your emotions are *sankharas*, fabrications—thoughts that get into the body. They feel especially real because they have a bodily presence.

One of the reasons we work with the breath is to burst through some of the constraints that our emotions place on the body. And also to give us a handle. When a particular emotion comes up, when you feel that it's not healthy or not positive or not skillful enough, try breathing in a different way. Breathe in a way that helps pull you out of that vicious cycle of a thought that leads to a bodily sensation and a way of breathing, and then that way of breathing leads back to a thought and a feeling. Changing the way you breathe can help break the cycle.

Then you can look at the broken bits, as the emotion tries to reassemble itself, and you can ask, "Why are you compelled to go with it?" This is where having some knowledge of the Dhamma can help, because emotions are not just raw feelings. They have their thoughts behind them as well. The way you talk to

yourself, the things you focus on, the images you have in mind that are lurking behind a lot of the thoughts: You want to be able to see them, too.

Part of the problem is that they come and go very quickly, especially the images that the Buddha calls perceptions: the labels in the mind, isolated words or little visual images. They're like the subliminal images that people put on TV. They flash for second and they go so quickly that your conscious mind doesn't see them, but there's something inside that picks them up.

The best way to see those is to not follow along with them. Question them. Say you're feeling down, and your mind is telling you all kinds of things: Well, question the feeling. Breathe in a way that feels good. Tell yourself, "This emotion is not necessarily mine, it's just an old habit. I don't have to identify with it." And see what parts of the mind say, "Oh, yes, you do." Learn to question them: "Why?" At first they're not going to respond. They're used to having their way without having to explain themselves. But you have to be insistent: Why? Why believe that? Why go for that?

After a while it'll start explaining, "This is the way things have to be." Well, no, they don't have to be that way. Challenge them again. Question your thoughts. Question your feelings. Hold them at arm's length for a bit. See which parts of the mind want to grab them and hold them tight.

Eventually you'll see something in there that doesn't make sense.

Now, part of this requires also that you change your sense of what makes sense. This was an important part of my training with Ajaan Fuang: living with someone who had a very different background, so that I could see that the things I took for granted were just part of my culture. I took them so for granted that I thought they were universal truths about how the mind works. He questioned them. Sometimes I'd take a problem to him that was coming up in my mind, some memories of issues in the past, and I'd explain it to him in my own terms. There were times when he'd look at me as if I'd come from the other side of the world, which I had. But just that look made me realize that a lot of things I was taking for granted as to what's worthwhile in life, how I would measure myself, how I would look at myself, were all pretty arbitrary.

The more you stay immersed in your culture, the less you see. You have to learn how to question the values of society. This is an important part of going into the wilderness. You get away from society. Even when you can't physically get away from society, you try to have a wilderness mind, one that learns to look at the values of the world—in terms of status, competition, praise, criticism—and can ask: "To what extent is the opposite true? Where am I assuming things that

don't have to be assumed? Where am I holding on to the things that make me suffer?"

Because that's the Buddha's image: It's not that things come in to make us suffer. We go out and we grab hold of them. And then we're trapped. The image he gives is of a fire. Back in those days, they believed that fire clung to its fuel. When it went out, it went out because it let go. And when it let go, it was released. That's why they use the word *nibbāna*, or unbinding, for the goal: the fire that's released because it lets go. In other words, it's not the fuel that's trapping the fire, it's the fire's own tendency to cling that's trapping it.

It's a great image for the mind as it clings to certain ways of thinking that get reinforced by living with other people who think in exactly the same way. So even though you may not be able to step outside of America right now, or whatever country you're in, one of the reasons we have a monastic order is that it is an alternative society, with an alternative culture. The values are those set forth by noble ones, who say that these values are really helpful for the sake of release.

It's like having a subversive alternative culture here in our country, one that you can tap into so that you can step out of the world outside—into a bigger outside, the outside of a mind that's liberated.

You're with people who live by the values set down by someone who was liberated, in which you find that you have a different identity where you're not measured by your job or your family. You're measured by the way you're generous, the way that you're virtuous, the care that you put into training your mind. These are different values entirely. And by measuring your generosity, it's not in terms of how much you give, it's more your willingness to give to people you find inspiring.

Then there's virtue, your ability to avoid harm to yourself and harm to other people. It's all about training the mind. And here there's no competition. We may see that other people seem to be more advanced in their concentration, but that's their business. You measure yourself in terms of how much better your mind is than it was before you meditated.

We sometimes had difficult people at the monastery in Thailand. One time I complained about one of them, and Ajaan Fuang said, "Well, you should have seen her before she meditated. In the past, as soon as she yelled at you," he said, "there's a phrase in Thai, *paag waa myy thyng*, which means as soon as she yelled at you, she'd hit you. Now she just yells: It's a step in the right direction."

So you measure yourself against your past self in terms of qualities that really matter: your basic goodness inside.

Goodness: That's a word that we don't hear much in our society. One time I checked on Amazon to see what kind of books they had on "goodness," and they

were all recipe books for baked goods. They measure goodness in terms of how much sweetness you can put into your mouth.

That's not the Buddha's goodness. His goodness is measured in terms of generosity, virtue, the training of the mind. That's a goodness that matters. When you've learned to live by those values, then when you leave the monastery and go back to your daily life, try to carry a little bit of that wilderness mind with you: the mind that's shaped by the customs of the noble ones, where contentment is a real value, contentment in material things, so that you can focus on developing good qualities in the mind and abandoning unskillful qualities. That's what really matters.

That's an area where the Buddha actually says you should be discontent. In other words, if your skill in training the mind is not getting to the point where you actually are beyond all suffering, there's more work to do, so you keep at it. It's a matter of learning how to focus on what's important: i.e., the training of the mind.

As for other aspects of life, focus on the ways in which you can make them part of training the mind in all the good qualities that make it a mind you can actually live with—a mind that's not creating trouble for itself.

So the practice is all about stepping out. You get with the breath to step out of your own mind. You learn about the Dhamma to step out of the assumptions of your society. And in stepping out, you become free.