

# Contentment in the Practice

*July, 2001 - Ven. Thanissaro Bhikkhu*

Every time you sit down to work with the breath, remember the story of the foolish, inexperienced cow. The cow is in a nice meadow on the hillside, has plenty of green grass and water, but sees another meadow over on another hillside and starts wondering, "What's the grass like over there? What's the water like over there?" And so because she's a foolish, inexperienced cow, she sets out. She doesn't know how to go down the hillside, cross over the ravine and go up the other hillside, so she gets lost in between. She doesn't get to the other hillside and can't get back to where she originally was.

This stands for the mind that, once it gets into a state of concentration, wonders where to go next to get something better. The trick is to learn how to stay in your meadow, so the grass has a chance to grow, so you have a chance to enjoy the water right where you already are. And the place where you are will develop into deeper and deeper states of concentration. This is why it's so important that before you start working with the breath here or there, adjusting it here or there, you find at least some spot where it's comfortable and focus on that.

To make another comparison, it's like starting a fire on a windy day. You have your tiny little flame, so you cup it in your hands and make sure that it doesn't get blown out. At the same time, you don't cut off the oxygen. You cup it in your hands just right, keeping that one little flame going, and after a while it will catch. Then it will spread throughout all the timber you've piled up. But it's important that you get that first little flame going.

The same with the breath: Find at least one little spot and stay right there for a while. It doesn't have to be a big spot, just a small spot. And content yourself with that small spot for the time being. Allow it to be comfortable. After a while it will catch. Then you can start spreading that sense of comfort throughout the body because you're working from a position of strength. You're working from a position of comfort, not a position of desperation or anxiety or restlessness, thinking that this has to be like that, or that has to be like this. Just content yourself with what you've got and allow it to grow. Content yourself at first with the small things, and ultimately, with practice, they'll grow into a greater and greater sense of wellbeing.

Remember that the word *jhana* comes from the verb *jhayati*, or *burning*. This verb isn't used to describe just any kind of burning; it's used to describe the burning of an oil lamp. When an oil lamp burns, the flame is steady. It may not be a big flame, but its steadiness is what helps it illuminate the room. You can read by it. If it were a flickering flame, you couldn't read by it, no matter how bright it was, for the shadows would be jumping all over the place. But the steadiness of the oil-lamp flame is what enables you to read even in an otherwise dark room.

It's the same with the state of your concentration. You stay steadily with one spot. The steadiness, the consistency of your gaze is what allows this one spot to become really comfortable. In the beginning it may not be all that comfortable, just an okay spot someplace in the body. The breath feels okay coming in, feels okay coming out. No big deal, nothing special. But you find, if you allow yourself to settle into it, that it solves a basic problem in the mind: the underlying tension where it's ready to jump at a moment's notice, like a cat settled in one spot but coiled up ready to spring. If you could take a picture of the mind, that's what it would look like: a cat coiled ready to spring. When it lands on an object, part of it is ready to spring away from that object as soon as it doesn't like the object, as soon as the object turns into something unpleasant, because that's the way it's been dealing with objects all along.

But here you allow it to settle into one little spot and let that sense of tension in the mind melt away. You melt into the object of your concentration and then let that melting sensation spread into the body, all the way down to your fingers and toes. This way the meditation goes a lot better than if you're constantly fighting and figuring things out too much. You've got to learn how to apply just the right amount of pressure, just the right amount of pushing, not too much, not too little. The more sensitive you are in your meditation, the better it goes.

So you've got a meadow someplace in your body. It may not be a big one, but it's there. You don't sit around worrying about where the next meadow's going to be or what other meadows you have around you. Just stay right where you are and the grass will grow. The water will flow. And you find that the place where you are starts to develop. That's the kind of concentration you can really live with.

In other words, it's the kind of concentration you can pick up and take with you wherever you go, not where you pre-fashions things too much and preconceive things too much and have to do this and have to do that and adjust this and adjust that and it all becomes very theoretical. Just an inner

sense of allowing it to feel just right, right here, to feel good right here, and wherever you go, you're still with "right here." You can identify where that good feeling is and carry it with you wherever you go. That's the kind of concentration that grows. It's the kind of concentration that seeps into your life and begins to make a difference in how you think, how you act, and how you speak, because it's there all the time. It doesn't require too much fashioning. It may require a little bit of looking after, but not based on what you've read in books. It's just a sense of wellbeing right here. You've got your little spot and you take it with you.

Ajaan Fuang once said that mindfulness and concentration are little tiny things but you've got to keep at them all the time. The statement sounded better in Thai because it was a pun. There's the word *nit*, which means little, but there's also the word *nit* — spelled differently but pronounced the same way — which means constantly. So concentration is a little tiny thing that you do constantly. When it comes from this beginning sense of wellbeing, it's a lot more stable. You can maintain it a lot longer. The sense of wellbeing begins to glow throughout the body and the mind when you allow it to happen, when you allow the grass to grow and the water to flow. Or, in terms of the image of the flame, when you give it enough space and protection to allow it to catch hold.

In one of Ajaan Lee's talks he says that big things have to start from little things. Sometimes you have to content yourself with just a little bit of concentration, a little comfortable spot, but you stick with it constantly. You plant one banana tree, and after a while it will grow and provide you with the seeds to plant more banana trees. So you take the seeds out of the banana — in Thailand they have bananas with seeds — you plant them, and after a while you've got a whole banana orchard. Or even better, mangoes: You've got one tree that you take really good care of. You don't yet worry about planting the rest of your land. You've got your one tree and after a while it gives mangoes, and bit by bit you can plant a whole orchard with the seeds you got from the fruit of the one tree. At the same time, you get to eat the flesh of the mangoes. You can enjoy yourself. After all, this is a part of the path, the part where the Buddha explicitly mentions rapture, pleasure, and ease as factors of the path. If you don't have that sense of wellbeing, the practice gets very dry.

As you're planting the mangoes and eating their flesh, you find that the path becomes a really nice place to be, a good path to follow — not only because you know it's going to take you to a good place, but also because it's a good path to be on while you're there. You're not going through the desert. You're going through orchards and lush countryside. If you learn to recognize

which plants are food and which ones are medicine for which disease, there's plenty to keep you healthy and energized all along the way.