

The Observer

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August 5, 2003

Sometimes meditation is easy; sometimes it's hard. But whether it's easy or hard, we have to keep our minds on an even keel. When it gets easy, don't get complacent. If you get complacent, things start loosening up, like screws loosening up in your car. After a while things begin to rattle and then they fall off. At the same time when things don't go well, don't get upset. Rule number one in either case is to keep the mind on an even keel. Have a strong sense of the observer, the part of the mind that's simply watching what's going on, and identify as much as you can with that.

Ajaan Suwat once mentioned that when he first went to stay with Ajaan Mun his mind seemed to be all over the place. He'd sit and meditate and be thinking about this, thinking about that, and he was afraid to tell Ajaan Mun for fear of what Ajaan Mun might say. But then he realized, "I'm here to learn." So he went to see Ajaan Mun, to see what kind of advice he would give.

And Ajaan Mun's response was this: "Well, at least you're aware of what's happening. That's better than not being aware of your distractions at all." Then he quoted the Discourse on the Foundations of Mindfulness: Being aware of a scattered mind when it's scattered counts as one of the foundations of mindfulness.

Ajaan Suwat handled that lesson really well. He realized that Ajaan Mun was not praising him but simply giving him some comfort, giving him some encouragement. He wasn't saying that where he was was just fine, but he *was* reminding him that it wasn't a total disaster, that the fact that he was meditating was better than not meditating at all.

This often happens with people: Things don't go well in their meditation and they say, "Well, tonight's just not my night to meditate. I'd do better to stop." *Not meditating is not the answer.* Even though it may not be pleasant, sitting through a bad meditation is better than not meditating. There may be some point in the course of the meditation when you finally come to your senses, when you see something in there that you didn't see before. This is why that sense of the observer is so important.

In the Canon they talk about the person who's got his or her theme of meditation well in hand, and the image they use is of a person sitting who's watching someone lying down, or of a person standing who's watching someone

sitting. In other words, you place yourself a little bit above what's going on and you watch it. You step back to see what's happening from a better perspective, to get a sense of where the imbalance is in your mind, to watch what you're doing, and to think about what you might do differently.

Exactly why is the meditation going poorly? What's lacking? Ajaan Fuang once advised making a mental note of the seven factors that Ajaan Lee sets out in his Method #2, and then comparing your meditation with them, to see what's lacking. If you've got all seven component factors, then the mind is going to settle down for sure: mindful, solid, and still. So check to see what's lacking. Are you not clear about the lengths of the breaths? Are you not clear about whether the breath is comfortable? Are you not spreading the comfortable breath sensations? Do you not have a resting place for the mind, for the breath in the body? Just go down the list, and if you find that any of the component factors are missing, try to make up for the lack.

But again, to do this you need that sense of the observer, the person who's watching and doesn't get upset by what's happening, doesn't get carried away, but just watches in total neutrality. When you can watch in this way, then even a bad meditation isn't a total disaster. You take it as a challenge. Tonight's meditation may be a little bit different from last night's. Last night's went well, but you start out tonight and things don't seem to be going so well. Instead of getting flustered, just ask: "Is it a question of the body? Is something wrong with the breath? Is something wrong with your energy level? Are you too manic? Too depressed?" Lots of different factors can be playing a role here, either factors in the mind or factors in the body. If your energy level is too low, you can change the way you breathe to energize yourself. If your energy is too frenetic, you can breathe in a way that calms you down.

Try to be as precisely observant as possible. Many times what makes a difference in the meditation is the details, the little things, and if you're not paying careful attention, simply going through the motions, you miss a lot. You may be missing something important even though it seems minor. Try to go through every aspect very meticulously, try to be very observant, be *close* in your powers of observation.

There's a word in Thai, *thii*, that's used to describe the closeness, say, of the teeth in your comb or the pickets in a fence — any series of things. It's also used to describe the frequency of a radio signal. The higher the frequency the *closer* the frequency. So you want your acts of mindfulness, your acts of alertness, to be very *close*: right next to each other, with no gaps. Otherwise, if you leave a lot of gaps there's plenty of time for the curtains to come down in the mind. The backstage crew can change the scenery, and when the curtain comes up again you're off someplace else. But if your mindfulness is close like this, then they

have no time to bring down the curtain. If they change the scenery you see it happening, and that destroys the illusion that otherwise would carry you away.

So whatever happens in the meditation, always stop and take stock of, “Where’s the observer right now?” — in other words, the part of the mind that can simply watch and not be moved by events at all. We’re so used to living in the part of the mind that’s constantly pushed around by events that it almost seems traitorous to step back and be in the part that’s not moved by anything at all, not touched by anything at all, that just watches, seeing what’s going on. There’s always that corner in the mind. So try to locate it, get familiar with it. Learn how to make that the basis of your stance, so that no matter what happens you see the events clearly for what they are. You clearly see the connection between cause and effect. That puts you in a position where you can use your ingenuity to make changes, adjust things here, adjust things there, try this, try that. Even if what you try doesn’t work out, you’ve learned something. You’ve learned that that particular tactic doesn’t work here, which is something worth knowing.

If you take this attitude then no matter how well the meditation goes, no matter how poorly it goes, it’s always an opportunity to learn.