

Taking the Buddha at his Word

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Ajaan Fuang once stated that there are two kinds of people in the world: those who think too much and those who don't think enough. He was referring specifically to concentration practice, but his statement applies to other areas of the practice as well. When some people come to the practice, they want to be told what to do and they don't want to have to think about it. They want a series of instructions that they can follow—1,2,3,4—and then at the end of the list, they'll be guaranteed results.

That of course places all the responsibility on the teacher. If the results don't come, then the teacher was wrong. It was the teacher's fault, not the student's. At the same time, the attitude of not wanting to think turns many areas of the practice into ritual, things where you simply go through the motions. You do it because you're told to do it, and that's all you know.

For Westerners studying with other Westerners in Thailand, this is especially dangerous. They do something because their teacher says, "Well, the Thais say to do it, but it's just the Thai way of doing things." When they hear that, they naturally hold back a part of their mind, saying to themselves, "When I get home, I'm not going to do it their way. I'm going to do it *my* way." It's like that image of the elephant in the suttas. He charges into the battle but he holds back his trunk. He's going through the motions of fighting but he's not really giving himself over to the battle. That's one extreme.

The other extreme is not so much thinking too much; it's thinking in the wrong way, trying to figure things out beforehand so you don't have to go through the practice. In other words, you assume either that the Buddha didn't know what he was talking about, or that he was playing a trick on us, and that the whole point of the practice is to figure out the trick. "He talks about the unconditioned, but then he describes a conditioned path—this obviously can't be true; there must be a trick," or "He talks about putting an end to desire, but how can you do that without desiring to end desire? There must be a trick." Or so the thinking goes. In other words, you try to figure out the path without doing it, as an excuse for not doing it, and you think that you're clever.

A similar comment can be made about scholars who want to have the final word on the right interpretation of the texts without really doing the practice themselves. They know all the definitions. They know all the words in the books. They get established as authorities, but without any direct knowledge of what the words are talking about. That's thinking too much, thinking in the wrong way.

The proper attitude is one that Ajaan Lee shows in his autobiography. He mentions that when he first heard about eating only one meal a day or going into the forest to practice, it didn't make any sense to him. Why would you want to go into the forest? It's uncomfortable, dangerous. Wouldn't the practice be easier in the village, in more civilized surroundings? But, he said, everywhere you looked in the texts, the Buddha kept recommending going into the forest, going into the wilderness. So Ajaan Lee gave it a try. He took the Buddha at his word.

This meant that when he went out into the forest, he didn't simply sit there and say, "Okay, now. Show me the results." He started looking around and thinking about what might be good about staying in the forest. Why would this be good for the practice? And in the course of living there, he came up with lots of his own answers. On the one hand, it's quiet and you have a lot more time for yourself. But it's also dangerous, and in the midst of the dangers you realize you've got to depend on the Dhamma to get you through your particular fears, your particular anxieties, the dangers, the boredom, the restlessness. You have no alternative things to fall back on, so you find yourself committing yourself more and more to the Dhamma as your refuge.

There's a great passage in the *Theragatha* where a monk out in the forest is sick. He says to himself, "So here I am—sick. What am I going to do? Am I going to go back and find a doctor?" And his answer is, "No, I'm going to depend on the seven factors for awakening and the five strengths to fortify my mind." That's how he gets well. In the case of the ajaans in Thailand, there are many stories of their encountering tigers in the forest and realizing that their only defense was metta. So they developed very strong metta for the tigers, expanding their mastery of metta by really taking refuge in it. This is how they developed their skill in the practice.

Going into the forest, going into the wilderness, really forces you to hold onto the Dhamma in ways that you wouldn't have to when you live in comfortable surroundings. Ajaan Lee learned this, one, through experience, and two, through thinking about it. This is how you understand the Buddha's teachings: both putting them into practice and thinking about them as you put them into practice. You take the Buddha at his word but then you also try to figure out, "Why did he recommend this? What's good about this practice? What are the reasons behind it?"

During my time with Ajaan Fuang, there were times when he would explain things, especially when it was obvious that this *farang* was pretty clueless on those particular matters. But he also commented once that "If I have to explain everything to you, I'll die." Which meant of course that it was up to me to try to figure things out—going on the assumption that, yes, there must be reasons for this even though, no, I don't yet know what they are. Once you have that conviction, then you start looking for why this is a good practice, how it's a useful practice. You start figuring things out. You understand.

This is how understanding comes from conviction, as in the list of the five strengths: The list starts with conviction, and then goes through persistence, mindfulness, and concentration to discernment. If you're convinced that there are reasons for these practices, you've taken the first step. Then you stick with them. And it's through sticking with them that, in the activity itself, you begin to see the good results. You start connecting cause and effect. That's how conviction gives rise to discernment.

An ajaan I know in Thailand once commented on this. He said, "Notice that the list of strengths doesn't start with perceptions or ideas or concepts. It starts with conviction." It's like being in a forest. If, when you're lost in the forest, you're convinced that there's a way out, you have the chance to find it. If you're convinced there's no way out, you're doomed. You're going to give up, and that closes the door.

So conviction leads to ingenuity. And ingenuity allows you to test different hypotheses as you practice. Which means that as you're working with the breath here, remember that it's not just in, out, in, out. There's more to the breath. And the ways of working with the breath energy are not limited to the ones listed in the books. You can get some tips from the books. They can offer ideas of approaches you might not have thought of otherwise. But it's also good to try to figure out your own approaches so that you can come to your own understanding. The things you understand through having figured them out stick with you for a long time, much longer than things you've simply heard.

So we take the Buddha at his word. There is a path, a conditioned path, and it leads to the unconditioned. How does it do that? You give it a try and see what gets stirred up in your mind as you try to develop concentration, mindfulness, and all the other factors of the path. Sometimes the practice seems to stir up a lot more dust—well, that's a good thing. If it didn't stir up the dust, you wouldn't have known the dust was there. But the next question is, how do you deal with the dust? How do you use the teachings to deal with that dust?

As the Buddha once said, everything you really need to know for the practice is there in the wings to awakening. So try to figure out which of the various lists is applicable to what you're going through right now. Or if you're dealing specifically with problems with concentration, as Ajaan Fuang once noted, all the issues in breath meditation are contained in the seven steps at the beginning of Ajaan Lee's Method Two. If you're convinced that that's the case, and yet the problem isn't obviously mentioned in those seven steps, what variations can you play on those steps? What are some of the implications of those steps that could apply to your particular problem?

As you explore these implications, you'll find that there's a lot more to them than appears on the surface. And that's an important part of understanding the Dhamma: trying to figure out the implications through experimenting, learning how to take a few basic principles and work out their ramifications so they speak directly to the problem you're facing right now. In this way you discover that they mean a lot more than you might have thought. It's a process of trial and error. Sometimes you'll come up with ideas that just simply don't work out. Well, that's important to know. It's something you can learn only from the practice.

This is how the thinking and the acting go together. It's the kind of thinking that's good thinking. If the thinking and the acting stick close together, then even when you think an awful lot, it doesn't become too much.

As Ajaan Fuang once noted, Ajaan Lee was a very curious person, very inquisitive. He once commented that if Ajaan Lee had met me, he probably would have spent a lot of time picking my brain, asking questions, learning what's taught in a modern university education. That's the kind of person who discovered this breath meditation method we're following: curious, inquisitive. Having that same attitude allows us to take the method and run with it, to see how far it can go.

So try to develop this attitude to all aspects of the practice, from the way we clean things in the monastery on up: There's a reason why we do it that way. And the best way to figure out the reason behind it is to do it. You take the Buddha at his word in this way, but you're also very frank about your doubts

and you honestly try to resolve any conflict between the two. That's how things become clear.