

A Stranger to Your Thoughts

November 21, 2008

As we're meditating, we're working toward two things: One is stillness and the other one is discernment. They go together. They are not two radically different processes. Because after all, to get the mind to settle down and be still, you have to discern what's going on in the mind. And to discern really clearly, you have to get the mind to be still. But this is not a Catch-22. These two sides develop gradually. It's not an all-or-nothing kind of affair. As the mind gets gradually more still, you gradually see more. As you see more, it enables the mind to get even more still.

You simply find yourself leaning to one direction or the other as you practice. It's like walking. You lean to the left, you lean to right. You use your left foot, use your right. And as for whether you start out with your left foot or start out with your right, that's not something you can choose. When you sit down you may find that the mind is ready to get still, so you just follow it, allow it to be still. Other times, it's not.

So each time you sit down to meditate, take stock of the mind. How is it doing? Is it feeling inclined to settle down? Or is it not? And if it's not, what is it getting worked up about? What thoughts are preventing it from settling down? You have to work with those first. And how do you work with those thoughts? Try to make yourself a stranger to them. In other words, when you see the mind incline in a certain direction, ask yourself why on earth would you want to think about that. Allow yourself to be surprised. Look at things with new eyes, like a scientist who takes a common assumption and questions it, like Isaac Newton. Back in his days, it was believed that things fell to earth because it was simply their nature to go down. That explanation of, "it's their nature to do that" covers up a lot of ignorance. So he asked, "Why do they go down?"

And he came up with an unusual conclusion, as with the apple. Apparently he didn't really watch an apple fall. But suppose an apple falls from a tree. Not only is the earth pulling the apple down, but the apple is also pulling the earth up a little bit. But because the earth is so much bigger, it's the apple that falls. But it wasn't the nature of matter to go down necessarily as much as it's the nature of matter to attract. Of course we still don't understand that attraction. Einstein came along and said, well, actually it's a warp in space-time. He took a number of other basic assumptions and questioned them too.

It's when you question your assumptions that you see new things, because for the most part we don't even *see* our assumptions. A thought comes up about something that would be good to eat, or good to see, and we immediately think, well, it must be good to eat, it must be good to see, it must be good to think about. So ask yourself, "Why on earth? Why regard that as good to eat or good to see? Why should I be thinking about that now?" Pose those questions in the mind and see what comes up. Sometimes the simple act of putting that little question mark next to your thought is enough to kill it. It's the kind of thought that survives only because it's subterranean. As soon as it sees the light of day, it dies. Like certain worms that live underground, as soon as they are exposed to

the outside air they die.

Other thoughts don't die quite so quickly, so you have to keep probing: What's the underlying assumption here? And as long as you're dealing with a thought that has a pull on the mind, but without allowing yourself to get pulled along with it, there is a chance you will see some interesting things. And when it finally strikes you that the thought is strange, and it doesn't really have that pull anymore, then the mind is ready to settle down.

Here again you can use your discernment in the other direction to remind yourself of why you want to settle down, what's to be gained from getting the mind still. And there's a lot to be gained. You see things more clearly, you are less a slave to your thoughts. The mind gets to rest. We use the mind all day long. Even when we're asleep we dream about all kinds of things. The mind needs time just to be by itself. And then you will find after a while it gets tired of being still, it wants some more action. You can either question that, or else you can make use of the mind's willingness to think by actively questioning whatever else is coming up. It depends on the situation.

So it goes back and forth like this: stillness, questioning, stillness, questioning. Sometimes the mere fact of stillness allows you to see things you didn't see before. Sometimes it doesn't. You can't always trust whatever comes up in the still mind. One of Ajaan Lee's techniques for testing insights is to ask, "To what extent is the opposite true?" For example, you start seeing how inconstant things are. He says to look for the aspect that's constant. Where it's stressful, look for the aspect that's pleasurable. And vice versa. Things that are not self—all too often we believe that if our insights fall in line with what the book says, then they must be true insights. But that's not always for certain. Turn around and question your insights. Flip them over and see to what extent the opposite is true. That way you add some nuance to your insights. And it protects you from running away. Because this can often happen. You get an insight and it starts adding on to that insight and connecting with this insight and all of a sudden you find yourself way off in the Andromeda galaxy far, far away from what's actually going on.

The whole point of insight is you want to be able to watch the process of thoughts arising in the mind, to see where there's the intentional element to go with the thought. That's where the defilement is hiding out. Why do you want to go with a particular thought? What's its appeal?

This is why the Buddha said that seeing things arising and passing away is only part of insight. The other part is to see their allure: Why do you like the thought? What pulls you in? Then look at the drawbacks. What happens when you get pulled in by that thought? And finally what understanding allows you to escape from it? If it's something that's not arising and passing away right now, you can just put it aside. Look for the things that are arising and nibbling away at your concentration, or actually blocking your concentration. Because those are the important things to analyze.

You can read about how everything in the world is inconstant. The trees are inconstant. The mountains are inconstant. But if you're not attached to the trees or the mountains, then their inconstancy doesn't really mean anything. It's not the issue. It's where you're trying to find your pleasure, where you're attached: That's what you want to analyze in these terms. Because again, those ways of

analysis make you a stranger to your thoughts, which is precisely what you want: to see them in new eyes.

Suppose someone else were looking in your head and watching your thoughts right now, and would ask you, "Why are you thinking that? Why this?" Try to be that stranger so that you don't simply take your thoughts for granted. The same with your assumptions, which contain within them all your defilements: Don't take them for granted. See them as strange. See them as curious. "Why would you believe that? Why would you want that? Why would you like that?" And when you gain some insight, question that as well until the mind has had enough of this questioning and it's ready to settle down.

This way you find your meditation leaning a little bit to the left, leaning a little bit to the right. And that way you walk along. And you find that the breath is an ideal place to do this walking. Because you can use the breath as an object to settle down and be still with, and you can also use it as a grounding for your analysis. When a thought comes up, notice how it affects the breath. Or when you breathe in a certain way, notice what that way of breathing does to the mind. If you can locate the part of the body that's tensed up around the thought, breathe through it and see what that does. This way you can walk in your breath. Leaning to the left means you lean towards investigating and questioning; you can question the breath or use the breath as a handle for the questioning. If you feel a need to lean toward the right, to get the mind to settle down and be still, okay you use the breath as a means for settling, for fully inhabiting the present moment.

So remember that the meditation has these two sides. It needs both in order to be complete. The Buddha never made any radical distinction between the two sides. He says to get into jhana or strong absorption, you need both tranquility and insight. And to develop tranquility and insight, you need jhana. They're all part of the same whole, it's simply that you'll be leaning in one direction or the other at any one point in time. But he never has you hop all the time on one foot. Whichever foot you start out with and however long you spend on either side, that's up to you. Learn how to read the mind and its needs, and you'll find that the meditation will take you where you want to go.