

People Who Think Too Much

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Ajaan Fuang once said that meditators tend to fall into two classes: people don't think enough and people who think too much. Most people here in the West fall into that second class. He said that people who fall into this class have to learn how to stay still—really, really still. They've already got the side of the mind that likes to ask questions. But all too often they see something a little bit, assume that they've understood it, and then they move on. As a result, they know a lot of little bits and pieces about a lot of things but they don't know any one thing in a lot of depth,

So, to know the mind in depth, you have to be willing to sit with one thing for a while, like the breath. Stay with the breath. There's a tendency to ask, "Okay, I've seen the breath now, what's next?" Go back and look at the breath again and again and again. Learn how to bring the mind to stillness in lots of different situations and learn how to maintain the stillness in lots of different situations. Then when you really begin to know the breath, you really begin to know the mind, because you can't really see the movements of the mind unless you have one place of reference, so you want to get that reference really solid.

Until you have a solid point of reference, you can't really be sure about your observations. It's like sitting on a train in a train station. You look across into the other train right next to you and you see that it seems to be moving, but you're not really sure. Maybe you're moving. You can't really know, because each of the trains is capable of moving imperceptibly. You want to see something that's really solid. If a post that goes past, then you know, okay, you're moving, because you know the post is fixed to the ground.

The movements of the mind are a lot more complex than trains and railroad stations. All kinds of movements are going on. Some of them are present intentions and some of them are the result of old intentions—in other words, they're past karma—and one of the important things in the meditation is learning to see the difference. But you can't do it just by making an observation once or twice. You have to be willing to sit still for long periods of time, to stay with one intention, which is the intention to stay with the breath in the present moment. Make it comfortable. That becomes your post.

After a while, you'll see other movements in the mind. Some of them will be other intentions that come sneaking in; others will just be plain movements. You

really won't know which is which unless you've stayed with your main intention for long periods of time and seen it in different contexts.

So, when you're told to come back to the breath, come back to the breath, come back to the breath, you're not being told not to question or not be curious. It's so that you can put yourself in a situation where you really can observe for yourself and be willing to check your observations. Especially as the concentration gets more and more subtle, more and more solid, you'll be able to see things you didn't see before. So it's not that you're told not to think. You're told to put certain questions aside for the time being until you get yourself in a position where you really can observe things. Then you can check your observations.

Another thing Ajaan Fuang said was that there are basically three steps to the concentration practice. First is learning how to do it. Second is learning how to maintain it. And third is learning how to put it to use. So simply getting the mind to settle down with the breath for a while isn't enough. You have to learn how to get it to stay there for long periods of time and then, when you get up from meditation, how to maintain it, like a bowl filled with oil placed on top of your head. When you get up from the meditation, don't let it tip over. Don't let it spill. Try to keep that sense of concentration balanced inside as you move around.

You're going to learn an awful lot about concentration in the process. The more you can maintain it in different situations, the more you learn about it. The more you learn how to put it to use, the more you learn about it—not only the concentration, but also all the other movements in the mind. You see which movements destroy the concentration and which ones don't. Then you try to figure out how to keep the concentration so that it doesn't get destroyed.

To do that is not just a matter of sheer willpower. There has to be an element of understanding as well. Try to notice: What is it that starts your concentration to unravel? What things coming from inside? What things coming from outside? Then learn how to use that state of concentration to unravel unskillful mental states. When you've learned how to develop a sense of ease and fullness of the breath, how can you use that fullness, that sense of fullness, to counteract irritation? How can you use that sense of ease to dissolve any sense of tension, tightness, that can come up with any kind of defilement?

I was reading a book today that said tranquility is good simply to get the mind concentrated, but the Buddha never said that. He said, tranquility actually can do away with passion, whereas insight does away with ignorance. You need both to cut through your defilements.

So learn how to put them both to use. And it's through this process of doing the concentration, maintaining it, and putting it to use that you really get to

understand it, and you really get to understand the mind. Concentration isn't just for stilling, it's also for understanding. Right concentration includes both tranquility and insight. Tranquility is the process of settling in; insight is how you look at your concentration, how you look at your states of mind in terms of the process of fabrication. You need both tranquility and insight to get the mind to settle down to deeper and deeper levels where it's really useful, and to cut through your defilements.

For those of us who think too much, the tranquility side is the one we really have to emphasize. We're the type of people who tend to assume we understand something, get bored with it, and want to move on. But if you look at, say, the history of science, progress is not a question of people looking at different worlds in order to come up with different theories. It's the same world over and over again, just that they had to go back and look more carefully at their basic assumptions, the things they thought they understood. They had to go back and look again, and look again, and look again. Sometimes we're too clever for our own good.

As Ajaan Lee says, there are times when you have to be willing to be stupid, to admit that you don't know. The way to cure your stupidity, to cure your ignorance, is to be willing to go back and look again. And the best way to do that is to give yourself something to look again and again at, which is what the centered state of mind—when you keep it with the breath—provides.

So it's important that you learn how to admit that you don't know all about something, but you don't just stay there with the don't-know attitude. You look again so that you can learn. It's like walking back and forth on a path. It's the same path you walk back and forth on many, many times. If you're not observant, you get bored. If you're observant, you begin to see lots of things you can learn about the path. So be willing to walk back and forth on this path, on this spot where the body and the mind meet at the breath, and always be open to the possibility that there is something new to see, each time the breath comes in, each time the breath goes out.