

## *The Values of Stillness*

*July 23, 2012*

Each of us is carrying a burden—we're carrying many burdens—and one of the purposes of the meditation is to learn how to put them down. Ultimately we hope to put them all down for good, but at the very least learn to put them down temporarily.

If you can't do that, the mind goes crazy. And if you simply wait for the time when you can put them all down, it'll never happen. You have to make do with what you *can* do. Given whatever level of peace and calm you can find, even if it's just for a little bit, try to use that as a place for the mind to rest. Then when you have to pick up the burdens again, you have at least a bit more strength.

So take some time. Tell yourself: Whatever your responsibilities are right now, whatever your ongoing concerns, the mind needs time-out. And when those concerns come creeping back in, try to figure out quick ways to fend them off.

In the beginning, it takes time to figure out what the problem is, and so your initial efforts may not be all that successful. But you keep at it. And then you begin to learn which techniques are most effective for you, which techniques are most effective for specific problems.

You may have noticed in the book *Awareness Itself* that Ajaan Fuang had a lot of very quick and sharp retorts. Well, where did he learn them? Partly from Ajaan Lee, but partly from dealing with his own defilements. He learned that the quick retort was often the most effective way to stop a defilement in its tracks. It may not have totally done away with it, but at the very least you can fend it off and get back to work, trying to get the mind to settle down with the breath and to stay here without letting it get pushed around by your other concerns.

We'd like to have the discernment that would go straight to the jugular, take care of all our defilements with one fell swoop. But that kind of discernment doesn't come without practice. And it doesn't come without concentration. Don't look down on the concentration or be in too great a hurry to move on to what comes next. With all too many people, when the mind finally settles down a little bit, their next question is, "Well, what's next? What's next? When do I get the discernment? When do I get the insight?" Actually, a lot of the insight comes in learning how to get the mind to settle down and then how to stay there.

It's in the keeping the mind still: That's when you learn about your defilements. The ones that sneak in and seem perfectly innocent and usually come with a voice of authority, the voice of responsibility, "You've got to care about

this, you've got to take care of that." Or if it's a Dhamma issue, "You've got to figure out this Dhamma issue," or they tell you you've got to figure out inconstancy, stress, not-self, "When is that going to happen?" In the meantime, though, your concentration has gotten all chewed up.

So protect your concentration. And it's in the protecting that you begin to see, "Oh, this defilement here is going to be a problem. This defilement has that trick." And bit by bit, learning how to fend these things off, you gain insight into what the Buddha calls subduing greed and distress with reference to the world. It's an important part of mindfulness practice, a part that's often overlooked: learning how to fend off the things that are going to come in and chew up your concentration. So no matter how insistent they are, tell them they need to know their time and place. Right now's the time to put them aside, settle down, let the mind have a breather.

And as you learn how to stay here longer and longer, this becomes your default setting. That way, when these issues come in, you realize that these thoughts are disturbances barging in on your stillness. The stillness is there first. That puts you in a much better position to look at those things and figure them out. Then, when greed arises or irritation, fear, grief, you see them as visitors, things that are coming in afterwards. They're not the ones in charge. The stillness is in charge, the stillness is there first. That's the situation you want.

And that can happen only if you really, really work at the concentration and see the value of having a mind that's still. It may not be giving rise to any great insights right away, and it certainly doesn't seem all that clever or entertaining, but it's your life. The life of the mind requires this ability to take time out and to regard all the issues of the world as intruders who are allowed in only when you decide it's really time to deal with them.

That's the set of values you need to have. This is where the concentration moves from being simply a technique into a set of priorities, a set of values—a way of ordering what's really important in life and what's not so important. All too often, the things that are pressing seem to be important. But just because they're pressing on you doesn't mean they're really important. It just means they're very insistent. The important things are the health of the mind, the ability of the mind to regain its sense of peace, its sense of inner strength. Otherwise, the affairs of the world just run over any of the strength you may have. So let the stillness come first.

Ajaan Chah's image is of someone who's sitting in a house and there's only one chair in the house. You're the owner of the house, you sit in the chair. Anyone else who comes in the house has to stand. The chair here is your stillness of mind. And

any other thoughts, any other concerns, any other responsibilities, let them stand around. If they don't like standing, they can go. You don't have to feel responsible for them.

The mind needs its space. It needs to learn how to take on this different identity of the still mind. All too often, you're told that as a meditator you should try to put aside any sense of identification with anything. And then they turn around and tell you, "Well, *be* the stillness or *be* the knowing." Okay, that is a kind of identification, and it's one you want to take on temporarily. So when a feeling comes in, you recognize, okay, there's this extent to which you've been identifying with it before, but you don't have to totally identify with it now. You have these other identities: the identity of the observer, the identity of the still mind. Let them have priority.

These identities are like the pencil marks that carpenters make on furniture they're making. They need to make the pencil marks so that they can cut the wood properly and fit it properly. Eventually, they'll erase them. But you don't want to erase them too quickly. If you erase them too quickly before you've cut the wood, you don't know where to cut.

So as you develop this skill of getting the mind to be still, allow there to be a sense of identification with that, that this is where you really want to be, this is where your center of gravity is. As for all the other ways that you've been identifying yourself that are not so skillful, let them be the intruders, let them be the visitors, the ones who have to stand. You can engage them in conversation at your pleasure, at your leisure when you want to, but you don't have to.

This changes the balance of power in the mind. It's a reordering of your priorities: developing a sense of values that really is good for the mind, rather than the values of the world, the values that you've picked up from outside, which may have their good points for the sake of the world, but they can be bad for you, weighing on the mind pretty heavily.

That's what the whole notion about the superego is all about: the values of the world that tell you that you should do this, you should do that, the values that you have to fight against at least to some extent in order to be able to survive. You can't just do everything as you're told, because a lot of the values of the world are not really for your own benefit.

They're very different from the values of the Dhamma. The four noble truths with their duties: They're for the sake of your true happiness. There's no need for a conflict there. Those are values you can take on, in confidence that you're not going to harm yourself, you're not going to harm anybody else, as you hold to these.

Now, one of those values is developing the path. And what's the center of the path? Concentration, right concentration. This is a duty, this is a *should*, this is an *ought* that should take top priority. Not because somebody else said so or someone had an agenda for wanting you to do this. This is your agenda to the extent to which you really do want true happiness.

Remember that the meditation carries some values along with the techniques. But the values are truly humane and truly in your own best interest. So make sure that those are part of your toolkit as a meditator as well. Meditation is not just a matter of knowing what to do with the breath or knowing where to focus; it's also a matter of reminding yourself of the importance of why we do this. When the Buddha taught the four noble truths the very first time, when he taught the noble eightfold path the first time, he started out with the motivation, "Why do you want to do this? Because it leads to true happiness, it leads to unbinding." If you can see the value of that, then everything else follows.