

Planting a Tree

April 15, 2018

Training the mind is like growing a tree. You're responsible for the water and the fertilizer, but the growing is something that the tree does. If you try to speed it up by pulling on the tree, what usually happens is that you pull it out of the ground. Its roots get disconnected. The tree dies. You have to focus on your duty, which is looking after the water, looking after the fertilizer, making sure that bugs don't get on the tree. But you can't design how fast the tree's going to grow.

In terms of training your mind, of course, this has a lot to do with your past karma. Sometimes there's a karma obstacle that gets in the way. It's going to slow things down. But you can't let yourself get discouraged by that. After all, if you do have some past bad karma, what's the best way to deal with it? To create some good karma in the present moment. Even though the results may not show right away, they will come eventually.

This is why conviction is an important principle in the practice. It's what keeps you going. In some cases, it has to be joined with patience. And the best way to be patient is to learn how to enjoy what you're doing, without thinking too much of where you want the meditation to go. Ajaan Fuang used to say, "Play at the meditation. Treat the meditation as a game." In other words, don't see it as a chore. See it as fun, as something you like to do.

You've got the opportunity to train the mind. Think of all the people in the world who don't have that opportunity. And whether the results come quickly or slowly, don't let that be an issue. Sometimes the results will come very quickly—and it goes to your head. You've gained this. You've gained that. Other people don't have that. And, of course, that thinking becomes a new kind of defilement. When the results come slowly, you get discouraged. You think, "I don't have the potential." Everybody has the potential. It's simply that sometimes there are things that obscure it.

So try to guard your meditation and guard your attitude so that you don't get discouraged and you don't get proud. Just keep watering the tree, loosening up the dirt, picking off the insects. In other words, when you notice a defilement or a hindrance is coming in, do what you can to get rid of it. And leave the growing to the tree.

You look after the causes you can provide. The tree has its own internal causes that you're encouraging. You can't make a redwood tree grow like a rice plant. Rice plants grow like really quickly. Redwood trees take a long time to get very

big. So maybe what you've got is a redwood tree. And comfort yourself with the fact that redwood trees, once they grow, are there for much longer than rice plants. Ajaan Lee makes a comparison. He says some people are like banana trees. A banana tree grows really fast and it dies really fast. Other trees, hardwood trees, take a long time, but then they last a long time.

So again, guard your meditation. The Buddha lists four guardian meditations. The first is recollection of the Buddha. You always want to keep in mind that there have been awakened people in the world. And what did our awakened one, the Buddha, teach? He taught the principle of karma, that your actions are important. After all, it was his actions that allowed him to gain awakening. It wasn't because he was some special god. He was just a person who was suffering and was tired of suffering and decided to see what the possibility of action was: "How far can your actions take you?" So when you think about the Buddha, remember that the message of his life all comes down to actions: what you're doing. All of us have actions we've done in the past. As I've said, sometimes those can get in the way of current progress, but you don't let that get you down. You just keep plugging in good actions as you can.

The second guardian meditation is *metta*, goodwill. Remember that you have goodwill for yourself, and that's why you're practicing. The Buddha said that when you start feeling discouraged, remind yourself that you started this practice because you love yourself. You want to put an end to suffering. Have you stopped wanting to put an end to suffering? Well, no. It's just that the progress is coming more slowly than you might have wanted or anticipated. But you can't let that become an obstacle. If you have goodwill for yourself, you just keep doing as much good as you can in the present moment.

Asubha, contemplation of the foulness of the body, is the third guardian meditation. It's good for reminding yourself that this body is not going to last. You can't take the body as your substance or as the core of your life, because it's going to have to go. But what is there to be all that attached to? The reason you're attached to the body, if you're skillful in your attachment to the body, is because there's good that can be done with it—not because it's good-looking, not because it's attractive, but because there's good you can do with it.

So if you find that by observing the precepts—say, you take on the eight precepts—you're going to get thinner, or because you're meditating a lot and have to eat less because you're meditating, remember you're making a trade. You're trading the body for the mind. And it's a good trade, because the body's going to have to be left behind at some point anyhow. The mind is what goes. And where it's going to go is based on its actions. So, the extent to which you have a body that

can still act, do good with it. Practice generosity. Practice virtue. Practice meditation. Squeeze as much goodness as you can out of it before you have to discard the rind.

And that connects with the last of the guardian meditations, which is recollection of death. The purpose of death recollection, of course, is heedfulness. We don't know how much time we have, but we do have right now. When the Buddha talks about being in the present moment, he never says it's because the present moment is a wonderful moment or whatever. It's always because death could come at any time. And there's work that needs to be done in the mind if you don't want to suffer from death. So when are you going to do that work? If you're wise, you do it right now.

So these are some of the ways in which you guard your meditation, even as you leave the monastery.

Here we have an environment that's conducive to the practice. When you go home, the environment is not that conducive. Other things come up. You see other responsibilities, and they start eating away at your time. But don't let them eat away at your determination to keep in touch with this practice. And again, don't see it as a chore. See it as an opportunity.

We play with the breath as a way of making it enjoyable, so that it is a game, in Ajaan Fuang's words. But playing with the breath also has some important lessons to teach, both about the body and about the mind. You begin to see how much even something as simple as the breath can be affected by your perceptions. And if you can create a sense of well-being in the breath, that gives you a solid place to stand as you face the onslaughts of the world.

So there's a lot of good that can come from playing this game. Just make sure that you protect and guard your attitude toward it so that it does have a chance to show its results. If it's a slow-growing tree, at least you stick with it until it gets large enough to give shade, fruits, the hardwood, all the good things that a tree can give when it's grown. Don't give up. Otherwise, you'll just be left with little saplings—a long line of dead saplings. But if you stick with one tree, it gives you rewards. Fast or slow, don't let that be the issue. Just be confident that the rewards will have to come if you guard your attitude well.