

## *One Hand Clapping*

*October 17, 2019*

Back when I was staying with Ajaan Fuang, it was very rare that we had other Western monks coming to the monastery. One time one came. He'd been to practically every meditation center, every meditation monastery in the country. He said he was looking for a quiet place, so we took him way up the hill. We had a hut up in the forest, far away from everyone else. The next day he came down and said, "Nope. Still not quiet enough." So I went up to find out for myself, and way off in the distance there was a little water pump in one of the orchards, but it was very faint, and it struck me that that monk would never find a place that was totally quiet. Of course, the problem wasn't with the sounds out there at all. It was his mind's fascination with the sounds, his commentary on the sounds. Or in Ajaan Chah's phrase, it's not that the sounds are disturbing us, we're disturbing the sounds. And that point applies to our thoughts as well.

What we're practicing here is something the Buddha calls *anupassana*. It's in the description for right mindfulness. *Anu* means to follow. *Passana* means to watch or to see. Basically, you're keeping track of something, but you're keeping track of it in the midst of other things. After all, there are physical sensations going on right now. There are thoughts going on right now. There are feelings. But you want to pay continuous attention to the breath in the midst of all that. As for anything else that comes up, put it aside.

The problem is that many of us think that when we're getting the mind into concentration, there shouldn't be any other thoughts, anything else aside from that one object. In the very high levels of concentration, that does happen, but as you're getting started out, you're bound to have other thoughts coming up in the mind. It's simply a matter of learning how not to pay them any attention.

The root of the problem is that we're too interested in our own thoughts. It's almost as if, as a thought begins to form in the mind, we think it's a little present. We want to see what's in the thought. We open it up, and sometimes there's something entertaining there. Sometimes there's something interesting, something practical. Sometimes the little box of the present is like Pandora's box. You open it up and you get swept away. One of the important lessons of practicing *anupassana* is to see your thoughts as not interesting. There's nothing there right now. Instead, you have to learn how to make the breath more interesting. Remind yourself that the breath does have an effect on the body. The way the breath energy flows in the body is going to have an effect on your health,

and it's going to have an effect on how your mind is willing or not willing to settle down in the present moment.

So there's a lot to study in the breath. There's long breathing. There's short breathing. In long, out short. In short, out long. Heavy, light, fast, slow, deep, shallow. And all kinds of variations on those various different ways of looking at the breath or working with the breath. You want to see what your body needs right now.

Now, sometimes the *anupassana* that you're following will switch from the breath to the feelings, and as long as the feelings are related to the breath, that's okay. Sometimes it'll switch to the mind. Is the mind steady with the breath? Or is it beginning to waver a bit? And again, as long as you're focused on how the mind relates to the breath and what can be done to make it relate in a better way, that's fine as well. You'll be going back and forth among these three things: body, feelings, mind. Those are the three things you're keeping track of in the hopes that you can bring them into one. In other words, the breath is here. It feels good. You have a sense of the breath filling the body, a feeling of ease filling the body, and your awareness filling the body. That's when they become one. But up until that point, you'll be following one or another of them. But as long as you're following them in terms of how they're related, that's okay.

As for any other thoughts that come up, you don't have to make any comments on them. Just leave them be. Some people get discouraged. They focus on the breath, and all of a sudden other things come up. They think there's something wrong with their meditation, that they'll never get the mind to settle down. It's simply a matter of learning how to focus in the midst of distraction and not get distracted.

The Buddha's image is of a man walking through a crowd of people. On the one side, there's a beauty queen singing and dancing. On the other side, there's a crowd of people excited about the beauty queen singing and dancing. And the man's walking between the two. He's got a bowl full of oil on his head, and behind him there's another man with a sword raised, ready to cut off the head of the first man if even as much as a drop of oil gets spilled. So, as the Buddha asks, would that man let his attention get distracted by the beauty queen or the crowd? Well, no. He's going to stay focused on that bowl of oil as if his life depended on it. That doesn't mean that the beauty queen's not there or he's not even aware of her. There's some awareness. And the same with the crowd.

The Buddha doesn't explain the analogy any further. I think the beauty queen stands for sights, sounds, smells, tastes, tactile sensations. The crowd stands for your mind's comments on these things. I'm sure that, if the man could, he would

like to have both of them wiped out, but he can't. They're there. So he just stays focused on the bowl of oil. In the same way, stay focused on the breath. Even though thoughts may come up in the mind, you don't have to get involved. Sounds may come in from outside. You don't have to get involved. You don't have to make a commentary on them.

Think of that image of the one hand clapping. When there's a sight or a sound and you make a comment on it, that's two hands clapping. But if it's just the sound and you don't make a comment on it, that's one hand clapping. Or thoughts come up and you don't clap the thoughts; That's one hand clapping. In other words, you don't have to make a comment, you don't have to get involved in these things.

But as I said, the main problem is that we find our thoughts too interesting. So just remind yourself that it's just the brain churning out whatever. It's like a factory that doesn't have any quality control, and the machines in the factory have a lot of momentum. Even after the products are no longer wanted, the machines keep on churning them out, churning them out. So you have to tell yourself you're not going to buy them, even though they're flooding the market and they seem to be really cheap. You're still not going to buy.

So try to follow the thread of your breath through time, or else the thread of feelings related to the breath or of your awareness related to the breath. Keep all these things together. Ajaan Lee's image is of a rope that has three strands. Each strand on its own may be weak, but when you twist the three strands together, the rope gets strong. So it's simply a matter of following the breath through time, the feelings and the awareness related to the breath through time, and tell yourself that, at the moment, nothing else matters. When you get your priorities straight like this, then it's easier for the mind to settle down.