

Practice All Day

December 26, 2020

There's an image in the commentary for the practice: There's a big termite nest with six holes and a lizard inside. You want to catch the lizard. So you stop up five of the holes and you keep watch just at the one hole that's still open. The six holes of course, stand for the six sense spheres. The one you leave open and watch is the mind.

Of course, one of the five is the nose. You leave that a little bit open so that you can breathe. But your attention has to be on what your mind is doing right now. When you're sitting and meditating, you can give one hundred percent of your attention here. Sounds outside: You don't have to notice them. Sights: You can't see them because your eyes are closed. Smells, tastes, the little bit of tactile sensation: Again, you don't have to pay much attention to these things. There's not a lot of variety in what's happening. You're sitting on a cushion, sitting on the floor. Not much is going on there.

This allows the mind to come to the fore. As we go through the day, so much of our attention is focused on things coming through the other senses, especially the senses of sight and hearing. We have to share our time with the affairs of the world, but now you can give all of your time to the mind.

The trick in learning how to meditate properly is learning how to balance these two different contexts. In other words, when you're engaged in the world, even though you have to open the holes of the termite nest, you don't open all the holes all the way.

This is where it's good to switch the image to Ajaan Lee's image of a house: It has windows and doors that you can open and close. You exercise restraint in your actions, you exercise restraint in what you take in, what you focus on. You choose what to let it and out, and what not to let in or out.

I was talking this evening to someone who was saying that he noticed that when he walks down the street, he's usually looking for all the pretty girls, passing judgment on the ones who walk past: Did they qualify or not? Of course, that wasn't helping his meditation. He'd come back from his walk, and his mind would be stirred up.

So he made up his mind: Look for the signs of aging. They're there. He found that when he came back home from that kind of walk, his mind settled down a lot more quickly because it had the Dhamma in mind all the time.

The mind was talking to itself about the Dhamma. That's a skill you've got to develop, because that's what restraint depends on: how you talk to yourself about the sights you're going to look for, the sounds you're going to listen for, and, with the ones that you do encounter, how you take them in: in other words, what you're going out for, and what you bring back in with you.

Talk to yourself skillfully: Remind yourself that the word for *meditation* in Pali, *bhāvanā*, literally means *development*—and development is something you can do all the time. Remember also Ajaan Fuang’s recommendation: Don’t divide the day up into different times. *All* the time is time to meditate, so when you’re working around the monastery, when you’re dealing with whatever, it’s all time to look at your mind. As for those other doors and windows, or the holes in the termite’s nest, be very careful about what comes in, what goes out.

I noticed when Ajaan Fuang was working with his students, he would get them to the point in their formal meditation where they were just with the sense of *knowing*. He’d have you first go through the breath, to get the breath all straightened out, and then balance the elements, to make sure the body was not too warm, not too cold, not too heavy, not too light. From there, he’d recommend that you go to space, and then, from space, to consciousness—awareness—knowing. He would have you try to stay with that sense of knowing as you went through the day, and you would try to notice what things would stir you up. If you found that just being with the knowing was not solid enough, you’d go back to the breath, to maintain a sense of the breath energy in the body and be aware of that as your foundation, as your anchor. But it basically was a matter of staying with the knowing, right here in the present moment, with the breath as anchor, or sometimes just the sense of knowing on its own.

Ajaan Fuang had one student in particular: She and her husband had an electronics store, and they lived right above the store, so their kids were coming in and out all the time—they had six kids in the family, five boys, one girl. And here she was in the midst of all that activity and yet she was able to stay with just that sense of knowing, knowing, knowing, as she went through the day. That was how she was able to connect one meditation session to the next: by meditating in between.

This is something you want to aim for: the ability to have some restraint over what you take in and what comes out. And this, as I say, will depend on how you talk to yourself. You want for the most part to get that conversation down to something really simple: just the perception *knowing*, or *space*, or *breath*. As soon as you find yourself leaving that one perception, you want to know why. If you have good reasons, if there are things to think about, okay. Things you have to deal with, okay. But if the mind is just spinning stories on its own, you say, “Look: You’ve got better work to do, more important work—developing this skill of having a perception that you hold all throughout the day.”

Now, notice this is called *staying* with the knowing, or *staying* with the sense of the knower. Sometimes you hear it said that you’re supposed to *be* the knower, but I cannot imagine how you would say that in Thai in a way that would not sound strange to every Thai person I know.

So it’s not true that all the ajaans taught that, which you sometimes hear. They would say, *stay with the knower*, which basically means stay with this sense of *knowing*. It’s a

technique, it's a tool, it's one of the skills you want to develop. It's not where we're going. It's part of the path.

And the path here is learning how to connect your meditation sessions—the formal meditation sessions—so that you don't have to start over from square one every time you sit down and close your eyes. You don't have a lot of garbage to clean out that you picked up as you went through the day. We tend to complain about things other people did, things other people said, but that's not the worst garbage. The worst garbage is the things *you* thought, the things you did and said that weren't really skillful, because they direct the mind in an another direction.

The Buddha's image is of the mind being bent. The things you think about, the things you go for in the course of the day: Your mind is going to be bent in that direction when you sit down. Here you are: You have a short meditation session—an hour, two hours—and you have to spend your time unbending it. Then you go bending it again as soon as you go back out. There's no way the mind is going to get straightened out.

You want to bend it in the proper direction, and then make sure that the direction that you've got it bent as you meditate is the direction that you maintain as you go through the day. That way, the skills of the mind get solidified, and you get more and more in line with Ajaan Fuang's idea, which was to make the day timeless. In other words, you don't have any particular times, there's only one time—time to meditate, time to train the mind.

When you can have this kind of continuous practice, it does develop momentum because it's all going in the same direction, all the time. Think of a car: If you drive for a bit, and then you back up, and then you drive for a bit, and then you back up, it's hard to build up momentum. But if you're headed straight down the track without deviating, even as you're dealing with other things, you can have in mind the perception that you're doing this from the point of view of the Dhamma. You're doing it from your inner foundation, the foundation that you've learned to develop as you meditate, and then you maintain it as you go out into the day.

Ajaan Lee's image is of getting some nice good food in a covered dish: As you carry the dish with you, you don't take the cover off because if you take the cover off, all kinds of insects and animals are going to come eat up what you've got in the dish. Either that, or flies will walk all over it, making it filthy. In the same way, you're carrying that sense of your inner center, your inner foundation, and you don't want anything else to touch it.

Now, it's good to focus on a sensitive part of the body, especially when you're using the breath as your foundation. Get a sense of which part of the body is more sensitive to tension in the mind, events in the mind, so that when the breath seizes up at that spot, you know something's happened. You breathe through the spot, and then if you have time, you turn around and look at the mind.

If you're in the midst of a conversation or some other activity, just take note, breathe through it, and keep going, but do everything you can to maintain that center, because it's in the act of maintaining it—whatever little talking you have to do to yourself to remind you to stay there, whatever perception you hold in mind to make sure you do it skillfully—that you develop discernment. That's all part of the meditation: The directed thought keeps you in line; the mindfulness keeps you in line. It's only in this way that you can expect to make progress.