

Mindful & Discerning 24/7

December 20, 2021

We've talked about the story of Ajaan Mun being questioned by a monk in Bangkok, a monk who was dubious of Ajaan Mun's ability to learn the Dhamma out in the forest. The monk said, "Here I am living in this great city with lots of wise monks. Yet even then, I find myself coming up with problems in the Dhamma and I don't know who to go to. Nobody seems able to answer my questions. What about you? When you're out in the forest, who do you go to to listen to the Dhamma?" And Ajaan Mun said, "I hear the Dhamma 24/7, except for when I'm asleep." That's the part of the story we all know.

The story goes on, though. Ajaan Mun said, "There's not a moment when the mind is without problems. A defilement comes up, and I realize I have to depend on myself—my own powers of mindfulness, my own discernment—to work it through. When that problem is solved, then another one comes up in its place, and I have to fight that one off. It's a constant battle. But it really brings home the point that the self is its own mainstay. I don't think about going to anyone else to solve my problems. I have to solve them myself."

That's an interesting take on the idea of what it means to be mindful as you go through the day.

A lot of people say they don't have time to meditate. But remember: What does the word *meditate* mean? Meditate in Pali, *bhavana*, means to develop. And you can develop good qualities anytime, in any place, in any posture, in the midst of any activity. It's simply a question of learning how to observe your mind and to see what your mind is telling itself. How do you talk to yourself? Or to put it another way: What are the different voices in the mind, telling you to do this, to do that, that this is right, this is wrong? Be alert to those voices, but also bring the other qualities of mindfulness as well. In other words, remember what kind of thinking is line with the Dhamma, and what kind of thinking is not.

And then be ardent. If you realize that a voice is coming into the mind and it's showing that it has some power over your actions, you have to ask yourself, "Is this really in line with the Dhamma?" If it's not, you've got to do something about it. You can't just watch it. You've got to figure out how to counter it, how to expose it as something really stupid—because that's what it is. Our thinking that's opposed to the Dhamma is basically very stupid. It may have its clever reasons, but it's going to be stupid in the sense that it's not wise. You have to learn how not to be duped by its cleverness. And this is not just a practice for people who can't

meditate many hours of the day, who can't do formal meditation. It's a necessary part of everybody's practice.

Usually, as we sit and meditate, we get so that we're very obedient. We're like little children in school. The teacher is in the room, we pay attention, we do our work. But then when the teacher leaves the room, or we leave the schoolhouse, we don't do any work anymore. One hour, two hours of meditation out of a day of twenty-four: It's a big loss if that's all our practice is. We should try to be mindful, alert, and ardent all through the day, mindful and discerning all through the day. Any thought that comes up that's opposed to the Dhamma, you've got to counter it right then and there.

Remember that there are two ways of doing that. One is simply looking at it clearly to see that it's wrong, and it'll go away. The other is if it has roots in the mind—if it has some power over your actions, over your way of viewing things—you have to actively question it, argue with it.

Think of Ajaan Mun arguing with his own mind, doing battle with his own defilements. One of the reasons we do concentration practice is to give the mind some rest between the battles. But also, the process of getting the mind concentrated teaches you some important things about its workings. As the mind begins to settle in, you use directed thought and evaluation—verbal fabrication—to get the mind still. Ideally, you should get to a point where you can drop your verbal fabrication so that when you pick it up again, you see it clearly. “Oh, this is how the mind talks to itself.” Then you can see these voices more clearly. And one of the best ways of exposing these voices, and making sure that they lose their power if they're opposed to the Dhamma, is to find some way of laughing at them.

We read books like *Awareness Itself* and *The Skill of Release*, where Ajaan Fuang and Ajaan Lee give some very quick retorts—some pretty good zingers—when their students say something stupid. And it's the same with the old Zen koans: The student says something he thinks is perfectly fine, and then his teacher points out immediately that there's something wrongheaded in what the student said. How do those ajaans and masters get that way? From treating their own minds in that way, treating their own thoughts in that way.

A good way to get started with this kind of practice is to think of the various ways you talk to yourself in the morning when it's time to get up to meditate, but you have the option of sleeping a little bit more, and the mind gives you all kinds of reasons for why you should sleep more. Take note of them. Write them down. Then look at them at another time of the day. See, when you're a little bit more awake, how you would argue with those voices. Then the next day, if that argument comes up again, remember what you were able to think of the day

before. This is a useful way of being mindful—keeping in mind a good retort, a good argument.

Then you remember your other powers: the ability to breathe in a way that's more wakeful; useful perceptions and images you can hold in mind to stir you to get up. Think of Ajaan Mun standing next to your bed, or Ajaan Lee, someone who you'd be embarrassed to have see your thoughts. This way, you use all of your fabrications—bodily, verbal, mental—to deal with the defilements as they come.

This is how you recognize the defilements as opposed to the Dhamma. A thought of laziness may be clever, but it's basically stupid because, after all, it's making you suffer. If you saw things in the right way, the wise way, you wouldn't be suffering.

Think of the arahants. It's not that when they gain awakening, they have no more karma from the past. They still have past karma that they have to deal with. Negative things can still happen to them. But they've learned how to think about those things, to see those things, in such a way that they don't suffer.

So if your thinking is making you suffer, tell yourself, "This is stupid." You may not be able to see its stupidity quite yet, because, after all, it is your normal way of thinking. But you can ask questions. Ask yourself, "What if the opposite were true?" Turn those thoughts inside out. This way, you can make your practice 24/7, be mindful 24/7, because you're not just mindful. You're mindful and discerning 24/7. When the practice becomes an all-day, all-mind affair like this, that's when it begins to have an effect.