

## *Elephant Training*

*April 13, 2007*

My father once went to visit me in Thailand. I suggested he might want to try learning a little meditation. So the first night, we went up to the porch of Ajaan Fuang's hut. His first question to Ajaan Fuang was about being a Christian. Was this going to be an obstacle in his meditating?

Ajaan Fuang said, "No, not at all. We're going to focus on the breath. The breath is common property. It's not Christian, not Buddhist, not Hindu; it's common property throughout the world. If you focus on the breath, you get to know your mind. Then when issues come up in the mind, we can talk about the mind without having to talk about what religion we're coming from," he said. "That way, we can understand each other. We talk about what we have in common."

So focus on the breath. Why focus on the breath? It's a way of training the mind, because a mind, like anything else if it's going to live in civilized society, needs to be trained. This is a principle that holds across the board. If the mind isn't trained, it causes itself a lot of suffering. It causes suffering for other people as well.

In fact, the Buddha once said that this is the difference between a fool and a wise person: The fool doesn't see the necessity for training the mind, whereas a wise person does. You realize that if the mind isn't trained, no matter how many wonderful things you have in life, you can destroy them – they can destroy you – because you don't know how to use them. You don't know how to relate to them properly. If the mind's out of control, you can't really trust it. But if the mind *is* trained, then you can live in any situation, deal with anything, and not add any extra suffering on top of it.

So telling the mind to stay is like training a puppy. Tell it, "Stay!" and in the beginning it's not going to stay. It's going to come running to you. You say, "No, stay!" And you have to use both the carrot and the stick—well, puppies don't like carrots, but whatever puppies like. In other words, you have to reward it when it stays, and come down hard enough when it doesn't.

Now, you can't use a stick on the mind because there's nothing there to hit, but you can talk to it. You can say, "Look, you can't stay put for even five breaths while you're sitting here healthy. What's going to happen when you start getting old, when you start getting sick, or as you approach death? What's your mind going to do then?" That's why we have that reflection which, in Pali, literally says that we haven't gone beyond aging; we haven't gone beyond illness; we haven't gone beyond death. These things are normal, and you've got to prepare for them.

So that's the stick. The carrot is that you make the breath comfortable. Learn how to play with it. Experiment with it. See what different ways of breathing do to the body, and see what kind of effect they have on the mind. Stay with long breathing for a while; see what that's like.

You can also try shorter breathing, shallow breathing, deep breathing, fast, slow, heavy, light. Think of the breath coming in and out of the body through all the pores. See what that thought does to the breath, and what that way of breathing does to the body and mind. There's a lot to explore here. You find that the mind benefits; the body benefits as well. So that's the reward.

This is really important, this principle of being trained. We all want happiness. This is the basic assumption the Buddha makes. Sometimes you hear that he assumes that we're all basically good down inside, but he never actually says anything about that topic at all. What he does assume is that everybody wants happiness. But through our ignorance and through our lack of training, the things that we do to find happiness often end up causing suffering. This is the big paradox in life. So he doesn't tell us to stop trying to find happiness; he says try to find it in an intelligent way. That's why we need training, because otherwise we keep piling the suffering on.

Things come up – and you notice this in the meditation – issues will come up and you find that you're afraid of them. So you try to push them away, push them away. You don't even really know them yet, and yet you're afraid. Like today, we talked about the sensation of heat in the body. When it comes up, there's really nothing to be afraid of; it's not going to kill you. Whether you like it or not, put that aside for the time being. Ask yourself what happens if heat fills the body, and allow it to do just that. See how far it goes. You find that even in that heat, there's going to be a sensation of coolness. If the heat gets too much, then you can switch to the coolness. Focus on that for a while. See what that does.

Or when the body gets really heavy: Sometimes you find yourself clamping down on the body to keep the mind really, really still, but then the breath gets uncomfortable. It feels like the whole body's made out of metal. Well, remind yourself that even in metal, there's lots of space between the atoms. Think of that space penetrating throughout all those solid sensations. As you tune in to the space, your experience of the body is going to change, lighten up.

What this means is that as you learn the ins and outs of the mind – the way its perceptions affect things, and the way you tend to add unnecessary suffering on top of things. You can look for what you're doing and then change it because experience is not totally a given from your past karma. Some of the things you're experiencing in the present moment are actually the result of your intentions in the present moment. It's a combination of both.

As the mind gets more trained – as you learn how to keep it still for longer periods of time and keep coming back, coming back, coming back to the same issue of the mind with the breath, with the body – you start seeing subtle things you didn't see before. One of the lessons you learn is that some of the things in your experience *are* a given. No matter how you change your intentions, they're just going to stay the way they are. But other things really do depend on your intention in the present moment, and *that* you can change. Your intention is related

to attention, the things you choose to look at, and to perception, the labels you give to things. Those things can be more malleable than you might have thought.

So when you realize there's a broader range of ways that you can approach the present moment, you can approach it with less fear, with more confidence. As Ajaan Fuang once said, there's no problem that comes up in meditation that can't be solved. It's simply that you might have trouble thinking up the solution on your own. This is one of the reasons why we read, one of the reasons why we have Dhamma talks: to remind you that there are other ways of doing things, of conceiving things. The range of possibilities open to you is more than you might have thought up on your own.

These are some of the benefits that come from training the mind. The image of training is one that keeps appearing over and over again in the Canon. There's a story of a nun coming out of the forest. She'd been meditating all day, and her mind was a mess. She happened to see an elephant trainer. The elephant trainer was telling the elephant, "Give me your foot." The elephant gave him his foot. Then the elephant trainer got up on the elephant's foot and climbed up on his back. The nun thought to herself, "Here it is, a wild animal, and still it can be trained! My mind is not a wild animal." With that thought, she went back into the forest, sat down, and was able to get the mind into concentration.

Your mind is not a wild animal. You can talk to it; you can reason with it. And remember, even wild animals can be tamed. The one problem, as another elephant trainer once said to the Buddha, is that he can take an elephant and within a week he knows all the tricks that elephant has – all the ways it tries to get out of doing things. But, he went on to say, with a human being, it's a lot harder to see the end to the tricks. The human mind is a lot more complex than an elephant mind, and so are its tricks. This is why it takes more than just a week to meditate and get all the results. But it's a worthwhile project. Think of how much better your life would be if your mind were totally under your control. A mood comes up, and you have the choice to decide whether to go with it or not. Just that ability can really change your life a lot for the better.

This requires getting the mind to stay still, having it stay when you tell it to stay, having it come when you tell it to come, then looking into how you shape your experience, and not being afraid to experiment. Sometimes the meditation takes more than you might want to give, but it doesn't kill you. I remember one time when I was first with Ajaan Fuang, he told me to stay up and meditate all night. My immediate reaction was, "I can't do that!" He looked at me and said, "Is it going to kill you?" "Well, no." "Then you can do it."

So you go back and think about that. Which part of you doesn't want to do it – "can't" do it? And often, you find it's your laziness or your unwillingness to put yourself out – something. But if you don't put yourself out for the practice, what are you going to gain in return? You give a little, and you get only a little in return. You give a lot, and you begin to find exactly how much is too much, how much is too little, and how much is just right. But you're not going to

learn the point of “just right” unless you give a little bit more than you want to. Push the envelope some, and when you find yourself really frazzled, okay, then you know: *That* was too much. You can back up a bit.

It’s like the avocado trees here in the orchard. For years, we’d been giving them too little water, and the trees were beginning to look a little bad. So we checked with an avocado expert. It turned out that even within the range we had been fighting over as to how much was too much, how much was too little, the expert said the trees needed a lot more water than even the high-end person thought. It’s the same with meditation. You put some effort in and you say, “Well, I’m getting some results. This must be good enough.” You don’t really know how much is good enough until you push yourself. There comes a point and you realize, “Okay, that was too much.” Then you can back up a little bit.

This is one of the tricks of the mind you’ve got to learn to see through because the mind, like an elephant, has its tricks. There are times when it’s lying to you, and you have to be willing to push it a little bit before it’ll fess up with the truth. But when you’ve learned that lesson, you’ve got a mind that’s more and more your friend.

Again like training an elephant: When you’ve trained elephants, they can pull huge logs through the jungle – something you could never do on your own. When the mind is well trained, it can accomplish a lot more than you might have even thought of trying.

So take advantage of the fact you’ve got a mind that can be trained and you’ve got an opportunity to train it now. And see what difference that makes.