

## *Catch Yourself Lying to Yourself*

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Ajaan Chah has an interesting passage where he tells his monks to keep watch over their minds, that that's the basic practice. And then he explains what he means by keeping watch over your mind, which is: "Try to catch yourself lying to yourself."

It's an interesting idea. Watching the mind doesn't mean just watching whatever comes up and being passive or accepting or equanimous about it. It means looking for deceit, which is a different process entirely.

Meditation is basically a process of catching yourself doing things that you didn't notice you were doing, that you were ignorant of. And ignorance usually comes from two different sources. One is simply not paying attention. The other is trying to hide something from yourself. So you've got to catch yourself in both kinds of activities: when not paying attention to things you should be paying attention to, and when actively lying to yourself about something, pretending that you don't know something you do know or that you do know something that you don't.

This is why, when the Buddha sets out the factors for the path, after he talks about the wisdom factors of right view and right resolve he focuses on speech, what you say. Because what you say to others reflects what you say to yourself. And vice versa. The two processes go together. If you find that you can get away with lying outside, it's a lot easier to start lying to yourself inside.

This is one of the reasons why the Buddha was so strict about a person who feels no shame at telling a deliberate lie. He says there's no evil that person will not do. And we've seen that recently. But in particular, you want to look at yourself. Are there times when you would feel it's okay to lie? Or that you *should* lie? You have to look at your motivation, and you also have to look at your sense of the possibilities of right speech.

When recommending that you abandon lying, the Buddha doesn't recommend that you tell the whole truth about everything. There'd be no end to how long we'd have to speak to tell the absolute truth about everything.

So when there are times, as he says, that telling the truth would give rise to greed, aversion, or delusion, either in your mind or the other person's mind, so you avoid talking about those things. In avoiding them, you sometimes have to avoid them in a way that the other person doesn't catch you avoiding them, because then they'll know immediately what you're up to. But at the same time, you can't misrepresent you *do* talk about. What this means is that you have to be very careful about your speech. And that's all to the good.

If someone asked you about something that, if you told it, would cause harm to somebody if you felt that that person knew, then you learn how to respond with a question: "What do you mean?" And then try to sidetrack the discussion. Or you learn how to phrase things in such a way they don't catch the fact that you're placing qualifications on what you're saying. These are possibilities that are there in human speech.

And it's good to know them, both to catch yourself and to catch others.

But the important thing is that you take care that nothing you say is going to be an untruth. That's what the precept is all about. And so there'll be cases that test that resolve pretty considerably, but you have to learn how to stick with it. Because the advantage of a precept is, as the Buddha said, you try to give universal safety to everybody. In other words, you don't know about how other people are going to take your information that you give, but you *do* know that you're responsible for what you say.

It's the same as when you don't know if you let somebody live whether they're going to kill somebody else or not. But you *do* know that if you kill them, you've committed a breach of the precept, a breach of your moral virtue. In other words, you've abandoned responsibility for what you are responsible for.

This is where the Buddha focuses his attention. Be responsible for what you're responsible for. In other words, don't do something that you know is against the precept. At the same time, don't tell other people to do things against the precept. As he says, you're harming them if you try to convince them that it's okay to break a precept or that they should break a precept. That's how he defines harm for other people. Now, you don't go around killing people but the biggest harm you can do them is not kill them. It's more harmful to tell them to do something unskillful, because that can cause them suffering for a long time to come: not just in this lifetime but in many lifetimes down the line.

We have to look at these precepts in line with the Buddha's teachings on the fact that we're all going to die sometime, we're all going to lose our relatives, we're all going to lose our possessions, we're all going to lose our health sometime. That's a normal part of being human. But we don't have to lose our virtue, we don't have to break our precepts, we don't have to develop wrong view. To break your precepts, to have wrong view: That's a huge loss, he said.

The other loss that we tend to see as looming so large in our lives is the loss of the people we love. He said that that's normal. That's a minor loss. You always have to keep that perspective in mind. If you start getting careless about your outside actions, out of fear or whatever, you're going to be very careless about your inside actions as well. And you find it easier to fudge the truth to yourself.

This is one area where you really should be totally open to yourself about: what's going on in your mind. When you've done something well, you want to take note of that fact. You want to learn to distinguish what's skillful and what's not, and not just slough over everything as you practice. Because it's in seeing the distinctions that you understand the whole process of what the mind is doing, what it's fabricating. And these distinctions are very subtle. If you don't learn how to be subtle in your speech and don't learn how to be discerning in a subtle way about your precepts, it's going to be impossible to be subtle in your discernment about what your mind is doing, how it lies to itself.

The primary example is when the mind gets distracted. Often the decision has been made quite a while before the distraction actually pulls you away. There's a part of your mind lying in wait for that least little slip in mindfulness, that least little slip in your

alertness, and suddenly you're someplace else. But if you learn to look for the fact that the distraction didn't happen just then, it was planned, then you can begin to detect when the planning starts and you can nip it in the bud.

This is one of the most important lessons you can learn as a meditator: to detect these underground decisions and redo them before they actually seize power and change where your focus is or change where your sense of who-you-are or where-you-are is. You've got to watch for these things. You've got to be on top of things all the time.

That's what it means to meditate. We're not just here relaxing; we're not just here to accept things. We're here to watch very carefully, to see how the mind is an active process and how it's making decisions and making choices all the time. We do this so that it can be very careful about what those choices are, having a strong sense of where they will lead us. That's what mindfulness is for: to remind us that this kind of action leads to that kind of result. And so you have to recognize it as "this kind of action" and remind yourself, if necessary, "I don't want that kind of result."

There are two words in Pali—*ottappa* and *atappa*—that are very closely connected. *Ottappa* means a sense of compunction: realizing that if you do x, it's going to have bad results, so you realize, "I really don't want to do that." In Thai they define it as a kind of a shrinking away from evil or as a fear of evil, the fear of the evil that would come from your actions.

*Atappa* is arduity. In other words, you realize, "These actions can lead to bad consequences, so I've really got to work hard to make sure I don't do that. These actions lead to good consequences. I've got to work hard so I can give rise to them."

The two qualities go together: compunction and arduity. We tend to miss that connection in the English translation, but in both cases you need a strong sense that you're responsible for shaping your experience, so you've got to be open and aboveboard with yourself about what you're doing and be really earnest in doing things well. This earnestness is what translates into truth as a meditator, being earnest in watching yourself so that you can catch the mind lying to itself. You begin to realize all the layers that are going on in the mind—layers of discussion, layers of decision—and you can begin to pry them apart. That's genuine discernment.

We like to think that discernment is totally confined in the words of the texts: All you have to do is realize, "This is constant, that's stressful, that's not-self. There you are, you've done the job." But that's not the complete job. You've got to pry things apart, to see where you're lying to yourself. Then you use these teachings on inconstancy, stress, and not-self to test the truth of what you say to yourself. Because the stress especially is there to warn you. You may be lying to yourself again and again and again, and lying to yourself about the stress, but when you're honest about the stress, then you can do something about it. So just seeing the stress is not the end. You've got to realize that there's a connection from the stress to what you're *doing*. And it's escaped your attention, either because you weren't looking or because you were hiding it from yourself.

So as Ajaan Chah says, keep watch over your mind, watch it with a slightly skeptical

eye. This is the same principle you use in everything.

I was talking to a professional athlete the other day, and he was saying, "If you really want to be good, you have to maintain that intention to come out on top all the time. There are some people who are just simply proud of the fact that they're professional athletes and then they stop right there. They're glad to be playing in the league. They never shine, because they're content with only that much. But if there's something inside you spurring you on to be something better, then you have a chance."

It's the same with the meditation. There has to be something spurring you on, and it's the perception of the fact that whatever pleasure you've got is inconstant; some of the things you're doing are causing stress; you're trying to control things that you can't really control: That's what not-self is all about. You've got to be able to detect these things, so that you can see how you've been lying to yourself. And then you can do something about them. You don't stop there.

I've told you the story about the person who wrote a letter to Ajaan Fuang one time, talking about how he practiced insight meditation in daily life, just trying to notice that whatever he saw, it was inconstant, stressful, not-self. As when he was watching TV, he'd notice how things were inconstant, stressful, not-self. Ajaan Fuang told me to write back to him, saying, "Don't blame those things out there for being inconstant, stressful, not-self. Look inside and see, what is it in the mind, the one that's calling them names: What is it doing?"

When you can begin to see the deceits of your own mind, that's when you start having genuine discernment. And when you're firm in your motivation that you don't want to suffer, that's what allows you to go beyond the deceits and see through them.

After all, some of them are very comfortable lies. We lie in certain ways because it makes us feel better. But, you have to learn how to peer into these things. This doesn't mean being down on yourself all the time. It just means being a little skeptical about what the mind is telling itself about itself. Ask some questions but being persistent in asking the questions.

And something good is sure to come from that.