

## *Cut, Cut, Cut*

*December 2, 2016*

The chants we have in the evenings focus on very ordinary things—parts of the body, food, clothing, shelter, medicine; the fact that we're going to get sick, grow old, die. All very basic stuff. Nothing about emptiness, nothing about interconnectedness—no big abstractions, just concrete details.

There's a purpose in that. It's to remind us that if we want to understand our minds, we have to strip things down to the basic details, keep things as simple as possible.

Even the meditation is simplicity itself: Stay with your breath. Come next week to hear a Dhamma talk, and it will be about staying with the breath. Be right with what's present in front of you, and don't let things get complicated.

That's something we're very good at—we let things get very complicated in our minds. That's one of the meanings of *papañca*. We can add all kinds of details, all kinds of ins and outs to our thinking. But that takes us farther and farther away from the real issues: What are we doing right now that's causing us suffering? You have to learn how to look right at your own actions, which requires that you strip things down, make things as simple as possible.

This is one of the reasons why the ajans go into the forest, to go off to be on their own. They strip away as many issues as they can, and be confronted just by the basic facts of life, the basic facts of survival. If you're going to live in the forest, you need to have food, clothing, shelter—very basic, minimal stuff. It's possible that you're going to get sick, so you're going to need medicine. And what do you do when those things are hard to come by? You're thrown back on your own mind.

Of course, if going into the forest were required for awakening, we shouldn't be here; we should be off someplace else. But it turns out that a lot of the ajans, many of the ones you often don't hear about, actually gained their experience of awakening in monasteries. So it's not necessary that you strip everything down outside, but you *do* have to learn to strip things down in your own mind.

This is the trick of living in a monastery, living in a community like this: not getting all tied up in knots. Learning how to keep things basic, keep things simple, in your own mind at least. There may be other issues going on outside—there always seems to be a work project of some kind, and there's the constant work in the kitchen. But compared to the world out there, this is all pretty simple. Of course, we can make it as elaborate as we want in our minds, but that's against the purpose. The purpose is to keep things simple, keep things basic. And the more you can strip away the issues of the day...

When you sit and close your eyes, you want to have all those things just go away. Remind yourself: It's just you sitting here with the breath. Awareness, with breath. Get even the narrative of "you" out of the way as much as possible. Now, you don't want the narrative to be building up in the course of the day. You want to be able to learn how to disentangle things as they entangle themselves, so that there's not a lot of disentangling to do when you sit down. If a comment comes by, remember the Buddha's instructions: A sound has made contact at the ear. You can know whether it's pleasant or unpleasant. But if you just leave it at that, then there are very few issues. And the fewer the issues that you create around the things outside, then the fewer issues there are to clutter up your mind as you sit down. So it is possible to gain awakening in a monastery. We don't have to go out and live alone. But it requires a talent—the talent of stripping things down, taking things apart in the mind, so that things can be as simple as possible.

This is one of the reasons why we train the mind in concentration in order to gain insight. You're focused on very simple things here in the present moment: breath, awareness. And you'll find out that there are layers to the breath and there are layers to the awareness. As the Buddha said, you notice when there's an element of fabrication, as he calls it, which is the element you add through your intentions to create a specific experience out of, say, the simple fact that you're sitting here watching the breath. There's some bodily fabrication, which is the breath itself; there's a little bit of discussion, which is verbal fabrication; and there's some mental fabrication, which are the feelings and the perceptions—the labels you put on things. Those are all here. But they're all here around something really simple. It's when you keep things simple that you see things in action that you wouldn't have seen otherwise.

You can start taking the layers apart. As soon as you see that you're adding an intentional element to what you're doing right here, right now, you can ask yourself, "Am I adding it in a way that's calming? Or am I adding it in a way that's stirring things up? How can I do it in a way that's calming?" You begin to see that some of the activities of the mind around the breath are unnecessary to keep it still, so you drop those. Some layers of the breath seem coarse and crude, so you drop those; allow the breath to calm down. And as things grow calm, you can see the basic elements a lot more clearly. There's an intention here, and you have the act of attention. And there are perceptions—all these things that we use to create huge stories. Now they're centered around one thing. And when they're centered around one thing, you can see them clearly.

My first year as a monk, staying at Wat Asokaram at the beginning of the rains retreat, a lot of the young monks were coming in for just a three-month ordination. Here they were at a forest monastery, and yet their parents had bought them cheap robes down at the store, the color of Fanta orange. And so the first thing the young monks did—as soon as they got ordained—was to go down to the dyeing shed and dye their robes a more forest-monk-like color. And for a couple of weeks that was all anybody could talk about: what mixture of red or orange worked best; how about a little bit of green; how much dark brown you wanted to add; what was the way to get the most impressive color for these robes. Some of the monks were not satisfied with what they got the first time around, so they would go back and dye the robes again. And you could see how people could take something very simple like that and make it a big issue.

The more I was focused on my breath, the more I could see how much people were adding to the problem. Fortunately, when I was ordained I did not have Fanta orange robes. I had already well-dyed robes, so I didn't have to get involved in the process. But watching them, it made me think of an experiment I had read about years before. They had taken a male pigeon and put it in a box with a female pigeon, and clocked it to see how long it would take to begin its mating dance. Then they took the female pigeon out and put a male pigeon in, in her place, and clocked the first male pigeon to see how long it would take the dance to begin. And sure enough, it began its dance with the male pigeon. It took a little bit longer, but it would do it. Then they took the male pigeon out and they put a

decoy in. This time it took a little bit longer, but then again, the first pigeon started doing his mating dance. And then they got objects that were less and less and less like pigeons, till they had a red ball. And again, it would take a little bit longer each time, but he would end up doing his mating dance. Then finally they took everything out of the box—and the pigeon was just there in the box, alone—to see what it would do. And eventually it started focusing in on one of the corners of the box and started doing its mating dance to the corner.

What that showed, of course, is that a lot of our activities have very little to do with what's actually there outside, and a lot has to do with what we're fabricating from within. So the more simple that you can make the outside, the more you can see what's going on inside, to see how much is actually being added from inside. And if you can start stripping it away—seeing that it's ridiculous, focusing on the corner of a box—you can gain some insight into your habits.

This is where we differ from pigeons. The pigeon couldn't reflect on itself, but we can reflect on ourselves to see where we're adding a lot of unnecessary drama, unnecessary complexity to our lives. We can start unraveling it.

In the beginning, it's like unraveling a big, tangled mass of string or a mass of yarn. It takes a lot of patience to pull out just one little strand. But as you keep pulling out the strands, pulling them out, pulling them out, pulling them out, the whole thing starts getting a lot less entangled, until you can see the act of intention very clearly in the mind. Because all too often in our normal way of living, our knowledge of our intentions is third- or fourth-hand. Something has made the decision inside and we seem to know about it only later. But as you strip down the various layers of perception and inner conversations in the mind, and get the various layers of breath energies calmed down, calmed down, then you get more in touch with what is actually making the choice in the mind, what act is doing this. Where is it? What does it say?

As you get closer and closer to the real thing, you begin to realize that the basic messages are very, very simple. It's when they get sent up through the bureaucracy that they get elaborated. But actually, it all starts very simple: "What's next? What's next?" In other words, where are you going to focus your attention now? And what are you going to do with it? And when you actually see the intention or the act of attention in action, that's when you can start asking, "Is there

something else? Is there another way of doing this, instead of making these incessant, idiotic comments all the time? Is there a state of mind that doesn't have to be disturbed by them? Can you stop them or allow them to stop?" And if you hit the right spot, everything begins to unravel.

So do your best to keep things as simple as possible. Strip things down as much as you can, even as you're sitting here meditating. Your narrative of how an hour of meditation should go—can you drop that? Just be with this breath, this breath. Any other filaments of distracting thoughts, can you just drop them, drop them, drop them away?

I know one ajaaan who had an image of a knife in his mind. Any strand of thought that would begin to connect in his mind, he would think of the knife cutting it. Even dealing with the body: all the sensations and assumptions that kept his sense of the body connected, he would cut, cut, cut. With the body, some of the sensations are actually physical sensations connecting to one another, but there's an awful lot of mental activity that goes into connecting your sense of the body, so that it's coherent. Can you think of just cutting—cut, cut, cut—through all those connections? When you cut through, when you strip things down, then just the basic elements are there, and you see that the real problems are there in the basic elements.

This is one of the reasons, as I said, why we have those chants that are so basic. Because they keep you focused on where the real issues are.