

The Sport of Wise People

February 10, 2017

When Ajaan Suwat was here leading the meditation, he'd often say to start out with an attitude of respect: respect for the concentration, respect for your object. Remember that what you're doing here is a very high level activity, in the sense that it raises your mind from its ordinary grubbing for pleasures—with fantasies of lust, fantasies of anger, or fantasies of whatever—and instead finding pleasure on the level of form, the body as you sense it from within.

This pleasure raises the mind because it's a pleasure that doesn't harm anybody. It doesn't harm you; it doesn't harm the people around you. And it's a pleasure that makes the mind clear, which is unlike a lot of pleasures of the world that tend to cloud the mind.

So approach this with an attitude of respect. And have respect as you go through the day for the fact that the breath is here. You can be focused on the breath at any time at all. Also, have respect for other people's concentration. That chant we recited just now about respect for concentration means two things: respecting other people's efforts at concentration, and respecting your own center that you work hard to create and then all too often just throw away. It's like it's something placed in your lap while you're sitting here meditating but that, as soon as you get up, falls off your lap and it's gone.

So instead, think of it as a bowl of oil you hold inside that you've got to keep balanced. Remember the image in the Canon where the Buddha said that practicing mindfulness of the body is like having a bowl of oil on your head and a man following behind you with a sword upraised, ready to cut off your head as soon as a single drop falls. And on one side there's a beauty queen, singing and dancing, and on the other side there's a crowd getting excited about the beauty queen. And you've got to walk between the two. Sounds kind of scary.

But you should have that kind of respect for your concentration—and, as I said, for the concentration of the people around you. There's that old saying that silence is golden. So if you're going to break silence, what you have to say should be better than gold.

When I was in Thailand with Ajaan Fuang, there were two things he said to me very early on: one was that "You're a Westerner. Your opinions are not wanted here," which was like a splash of cold water in my face. But then I found it very liberating that I didn't have to have opinions. I could stay with my concentration, stay with my center. And if people thought I was dumb, that was fine. And if people thought I was wise because I was so quiet, well, that was fine, too.

The other thing he said was when he heard me in conversation with another young monk about a point of Dhamma and I was saying “Well, I think it’s probably like this.” And he said, “If you don’t know, then why expose your ignorance? Why inflict your ignorance on other people?” And he went on to say, “You should have a rule for yourself that if something isn’t necessary to say, you don’t say it.”

So that’s the question you should always ask before you open your mouth, “Is this necessary to say?” He went on to say, “If you can’t control your mouth, there’s no way you’re going to control your mind.” A good lesson.

After all, when you’re getting the mind to settle down, you’re engaging in what they call verbal fabrication: directed thought and evaluation. And if you can’t control your verbal fabrication as you go through the day, it’s going to be really hard to control it as you sit down to meditate. So keep very careful control over your mouth, because it is liberating not having to have opinions—and allowing yourself to be a mysterious person.

But this doesn’t have to be grim. That relates to another one of Ajaan Fuang’s statements during my first stay with him, which was that, “Jhana is the sport of wise people.” It’s something to enjoy. And you can make that your challenge: “How can I keep the mind centered in this kind of situation? How can I keep it centered in that kind of situation?” When there’s physical pain, when there are a lot of people talking around you saying stupid things, can you maintain your restraint? And how can you make a game out of it?

Remember, one of the customs of the noble ones is to take delight in developing, i.e., developing skilful qualities, and to take delight in abandoning unskilful qualities. Make that your sport. All too often, we get our entertainment in the course of the day by slipping off concentration and indulging in fantasies. And we excuse it by saying, “Well, the mind needs a little time off, needs some rest, needs some entertainment.” But the fantasies usually involve passion or lust or greed or anger, aversion, ill will, or just plain delusion. And you have to ask yourself “Haven’t you had enough of that? Isn’t there better entertainment?”

How about the entertainment of learning how to breathe in different ways? The entertainment of learning how to conceive the breath in different ways? Explore that connection. How is it that holding a picture in the mind will change the way you breathe? And what pictures *are* you holding in the mind?

There’s that great series of questions that Dogen asks: “Is the mind sitting in the body or is the body sitting in the mind?” “Where are you in the body right now? Can you think of yourself as someplace else?” That last question wasn’t his, but it’s a good follow-up question. Can you think of yourself as hovering outside the body? Can you be inside the body in different places? When the breath comes in, can it come in from the back? Can the breath

begin *in* the body, and not outside? And how about the breath energy around the body?

There are a lot of things you can explore here. You can get your entertainment in this way, at the same time seeing it as a challenge. As you're working, how do you keep the mind still? As you're walking up the hill, how do you keep the mind still? As you're walking down the hill, how do you keep it still? As you're drifting off to sleep, can you notice the point where you begin to lose touch with where you are and start entering into a dream world?

You're sitting here breathing and all of a sudden there's going to be a distraction. Can you tell ahead of time when the distraction is coming? What are the warning signs? Think of these things as challenges. And be the kind of person who enjoys challenges. Because that's the only way you're going to develop skill.

You read about people who are really good at a particular sport or a particular instrument. They learn all the basic steps, but then they use their imagination to figure out how they can be better—and to figure out what things might be done with that skill that other people haven't thought of. It may not be the case that you're going to think of something new to do with the meditation that nobody else ever thought of, but at least it's going to be new for you.

We're not cutting off the faculties of the mind. We're taking all the faculties of the mind and bringing them to bear on this issue of how we can find a true happiness, how we can learn to unlearn our old ways of acting and thinking and speaking. We've been doing these things with ignorance, but now we're bringing knowledge to them. And you know where knowledge comes from: It comes from experimenting. So think of some new breath experiments, some new concentration experiments.

Instead of focusing in the middle of the body, start out on the periphery and then move in. See what that does. In this way, you become a wise person whose sport is jhana. You're not the old person you were whose sport was indulging in different kinds of fantasies and finding your entertainment that way. Even though you're engaged in restraint, the fact that you're not asked to have opinions about things means you're more free to play inside.

It's like the monks rules. When I was first ordained, the books on the rules seemed awfully big. Lots and lots of rules. But then I began to realize that having the rules gave me an independence I had never had before. It opened huge areas of time in my life to explore my own mind.

So think of restraint in the same way. It's not a prison. It's a protection against the prisons of other people's minds and the old prisons of your own

mind. It opens huge new areas inside. Learn to see the joy in restraint. Because it offers a lot more joy than your old activities: a joy that's actually worthy of respect.