

The Riddle Tree

October 12, 2006

There's a story of a young American monk ordained in Thailand who went to study with one of the famous forest ajaans. He asked the ajaan, "What meditation object is going to bring calm and peace to my mind?" And the ajaan said, "I don't know. You have to find out." The young monk hearing, "I don't know," thought it meant that "I don't know anything about meditation." He ended up disrobing and going someplace else. But that's not what the ajaan meant. What he meant was that each of us has to find out what's going to work for us as we meditate. You have to find the object that's most suitable for you, and the best way to relate to it. The whole purpose of developing concentration is to get the mind to settle down, and the way to get it to settle down is to give it a place where it likes to stay settled. What's going to work for you is going to depend on your preferences, on your background, on all kinds of factors that are purely personal.

For each of us, the process of developing concentration is an individual thing. So you have to explore. There's no telling exactly what kind of breathing is going to be good for you, or whether there are times when you need to focus on something else instead: like recollecting the Buddha, recollecting the Dhamma, the Sangha, contemplating of the body, developing thoughts of goodwill, compassion, empathetic joy, or equanimity. It's really a personal matter which of these is going to work for you.

There's no one-size-fits-all kind of meditation. Breath meditation comes the closest to a universal object because, after all, we all have a breath, and for all of us it's an important part of our lives. Ajaan Lee recommends taking it as your home base. It's the safest of all meditation objects. But there are times when you need to forage around in other areas. You may find yourself way off in left field and have to find your way back to home base. It may require thoughts of goodwill to get back there or it may require contemplation of the body. This is something you have to explore for yourself. You have to experiment. You have to learn how to observe to see what works.

This is why being observant is so essential to the practice. There's a lot that even the most psychic teacher who can read minds cannot tell you. Ajaan Fuang, who I firmly believe could read my mind and the minds of many other people, said one time, "Even when you can read minds, you can't tell what's going to work for somebody: how they'll respond to your words, what technique is going to work for them. That's something that they have to find out from within." So be willing to explore.

The same principle applies not only to tranquility, but also to insight. There's a sutta called *The Riddle Tree* in which a monk goes to different senior monks and asks them, "What topic do you contemplate in order to gain awakening?" One monk says, "the five aggregates," another one says, "the six sense media," another one says, "the six elements," another one says "dependent co-arising." The monk was not satisfied with all these different answers, because he couldn't understand why their answers should be so different. So he went to see the

Buddha. And the Buddha said that the different answers were like the Riddle tree. Apparently there's a tree in India that's kind of like the coral tree: During some seasons it has leaves, and at other seasons it has no leaves at all, and when it has no leaves it puts out red flowers. It's called the Riddle tree because people would say, "What's black like coal in the winter and red like meat in the spring?" That sort of thing. In other words, the appearance of the tree depends on which time of year you're talking about. "In the same way," the Buddha said, "those different monks answered in different ways because for each of them a different topic worked, so they talked in line with what had worked for them."

So again with regard to insight, there's no one-size-fits-all, no one technique that's going to work for everyone. But if you're observant while you calm down the mind, you begin to see the way *your* mind works. That's really what you want to know. Some people as they are meditating tend to focus on the issue of feeling: which feelings are pleasant and how to relate to pleasant feelings. Sometimes you find it easy to stay focused on the breath and have a pleasant feeling alongside the breath, and yet not get distracted. Other people have a real problem. As soon as a pleasant feeling comes up, they drop the breath, run to the pleasant feeling, and end up losing their focus. So in that case, it's going to be important to gain insight into the nature of feeling just to get the mind to settle down.

This is how discernment fosters concentration. The typical pattern, of course, is that concentration fosters discernment. But as the Buddha said at one point, to get the mind to settle down to good strong concentration you need both tranquility and insight. Sometimes you'll depend more on one side than on the other. And it will vary from day to day, from session to session, even from right now to five minutes from now. Sometimes when you're starting to get the mind to settle down, it's simply a matter of getting it calm and not thinking about anything else. All you have to do is allow the meditation object to do its work. At other times, you have to understand what you're doing, understand the problems that are arising, learn how to ask questions and attempt answers.

So if you notice that you're having a problem slipping off into feelings of pleasure and finding yourself in a nice hazy spot where you don't really know where you are - you're not asleep, but you're not really focused on anything—you know you've got a problem with pleasure. You've got to back up. What can you do? Well, when there's a pleasant rhythm going in the breath, you've immediately got to work on developing your frame of reference, spreading your awareness so that it fills the whole body as you breathe in, the whole body as you breathe out. In other words, you have to change your perception of what you're focused on in order to overcome the attraction to the feeling.

This of course then gets you into issues of perception—*sañña* in Pali—and the role it plays in meditation. In cases like that you may find that the perception becomes the issue on which you have to focus in order to gain insight. This is particularly true as you're shifting from form levels of concentration to the formless. It's a shift in perception. You're right here when you go from, say focusing on the breath to the point where the breath gets really still. You begin to notice that the boundary of the body begins to disappear. It's as if your sensation of the body is just a cloud of little sensation droplets or little sensation points, and you learn how to stay there for a while.

Sometimes you feel afraid of the fact that the breath isn't coming in and out, so you switch back. You have to learn how to not get fooled by that thought construct. When you get past that, then you realize that instead of focusing on the little droplets or points of sensation, you can focus on the space in between. Now if you find yourself suddenly visualizing infinite space, you might get disoriented, because your mind stretches out to the limits of infinity of that space. That can be calming, or you might find it disturbing. If it's disturbing, ask yourself: Which sense door are you focused on? Are you focused on the visual sense door or the bodily sense door? This is where you switch from issues of the aggregates to issues of the sense doors. Stay simply with the bodily sensation of space. Don't go off into the visualization of space, because the sensation of space can be really pleasant but the visualization can be disorienting.

Then from there on in, it's more an issue of perception again. How are you going to label this experience? You can label it as space, or you can label it simply as infinite consciousness: what's aware of the space. Or the sense of oneness in that infinite consciousness. What happens if you drop the perception of oneness? Nothingness. And what happens when you drop the perception of "nothing"? And so on down the line. You see that as you get the mind through stages of concentration, you're going to be shifting around among issues of thought fabrication or perception or feeling or consciousness or form, the body: all the aggregates.

Or you may find that the issue is how you visualize things as opposed to how you feel them: those are issues of the sense media. Or you start looking into questions of causation: What are you doing that's causing stress in any particular state of mind? You can't let go of the stress. As the Buddha said, your duty with regard to stress is to comprehend it. But you can figure out what thought formation, what craving is causing it; then you can stop that. It's like finding yourself choking on smoke. You can't put out the smoke, but you can put out the fire. And you find that this kind of analysis works on getting you from one stage of concentration into another.

So simply putting the mind through its paces as you get it to concentrate begins to throw up certain issues about the aggregates, sense media, causality. And the issues that you tend to find most fascinating or those that cause you the most trouble: Those are the issues you should focus on for the sake of insight, the insights that first lead to stronger concentration, and then lead to release.

No one can tell you beforehand what's going to be the topic on which you can settle down—what kind of breathing is going to be best for you, or when there are times you have to focus on something else in addition to the breath or beside the breath. No one can tell you what's going to give rise to insight. There are all sorts of insight techniques out there, but they're really just sophisticated forms of concentration. The actual insight has to come from seeing how your own mind works. And the best way to see it working is to put it through the laboratory experiment of getting it to settle down.

It's like learning how to cook. You can just throw some ingredients in the pot and hope that it comes out Ok. Or you can begin to notice what kind of cooking techniques work best, so that the thing gets cooked through without burning. Or if you're fixing a stew of different vegetables, which vegetables have to go in first, which vegetables go in later, so that you don't end up with some

undercooked and others overcooked. Looking for the technique that works: That's what gives rise to insight, gives rise to understanding about the food. And the same principle works in the mind. You've got to notice what works and where you have problems; learn how to question the problems and figure out an answer. The basic terms of analysis in terms of the aggregates, the sense media, the elements, dependent co-arising, are there to give you ideas. But as to what's actually going to work in any particular situation depends on your own proclivities, your own powers of observation, your own ingenuity.

That's when the insight becomes not just a topic you read about or something you try to impose on the mind, but something that grows naturally out of the practice of learning how to bring the mind to a sense of peace, a sense of calm. The more natural the questions and the experience, the deeper the insight is going to go, and the more relevant it is to the actual suffering that's going on in your mind.

So this is why meditation is a process of exploration. You're not trying to clone enlightenment. You're trying to explore cause and effect as they reveal themselves in the process of bringing your own mind to peace.