

Feeding your Attack Dogs

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A couple of years back I read an account by a woman who had been on a meditation retreat. You've probably heard about vipassana romances, and she had a really bad case. She suddenly fixated on a young man who was also on the retreat a very strong sense of desire. She found that she couldn't be in the meditation hall with him, so she went off to meditate in her own room. And that's when she realized, or so she said, that it wasn't just her personal desire she was feeling. It was desire as a cosmic force running through her. And she wasn't responsible for it, so it was all okay.

It's scary to think that this person is now a meditation teacher, teaching people about cosmic desire, or whatever. She'd missed an important point in what the Buddha taught about desire: that when these things come into the mind, it's not cosmic forces acting through you, it's your old karma: these thoughts that spring up over you and suddenly take you off in different directions. You're sitting here meditating, minding your own business, very dutifully working with the breath, and then suddenly you find yourself off someplace else. The fact that there was the initial impulse to go someplace else: That's past karma. The present karma is your decision at some point to go along with it. You're hardly conscious of it, the fact that you did make a decision, is because these things operate so far below the radar level of the ordinary mind.

This is one of the important issues you have to face in your meditation: that a lot of decisions are going on behind the walls you've erected in the mind, and you don't like to think about the decisions you're making. But the fact is, you are, and you've got to bring your radar down so that nothing can go below it. So prepare yourself for the fact that the mind is going to leave the breath. There will be a lot of vagrant intentions that don't fall in line with the initial intention, which was to stay here with the breathing, to try to stay concentrated all through the hour. You've got to watch out for the present karma of when you decide to suddenly slip off to contemplate what you're going to do next week—or what you did last week, or what you'd like to have for a meal tomorrow, or how you're upset about something somebody said or did, or how you're embarrassed about something you did a while back. These things are going to come up. And you've got to be prepared to notice the stirrings in the mind when they're just an incipient form, so you can catch them in time and reaffirm your intention to stay here with the breath, to enjoy the breath.

So you're dealing with a complex issue: a combination of past karma and present karma. While you're here, you want to watch out for the past karma. While you're here, you want to watch out for the present karma. Where does that past karma come from? All too often when we think about past karma, we think about previous lifetimes where you don't know who you were, or what you were doing, or why you're developing the habits you have. But past karma is often karma from today: thoughts you had in the course of the day that you allowed yourself to wander with for a while. Well, that becomes a habit. And then that habit gets carried into the meditation.

So when you're working on the mind, it's not just a matter of what you're doing while you're here sitting with your eyes closed, but also of what you do and think about during the rest of the day. The Buddha talks about *anusaya*, which is sometimes translated as latent tendency, sometimes as obsession: these latent desires, latent drives in the mind that we keep feeding, throw them little scraps in the course of the day so they get used to being fed. It's like a team of attack dogs that we keep penned up in the house. You don't want them to be too well fed, because then they get lazy and fat, and they won't attack intruders when you want them to. But if they stay too hungry, you're afraid they'll attack you. So you're constantly throwing them little scraps; if you don't, they're going to turn on you and eat you up. But actually, of course, they're gnawing on you all the time. And the more you feed them, the more they actually eat you up. If you don't want them to attack during the meditation, you have to learn how not to feed them at all, so that they ultimately die.

There are seven in all: sensual passion, irritation, views, uncertainty, conceit, passion for becoming, and ignorance. These are the things we keep feeding over the course of the day. If you find yourself getting interested in something really attractive, you're throwing a little scrap to sensual passion. Thinking about things that you feel righteously angry about, you are throwing some scraps to irritation and to views. And you do the same with ignorance and conceit: comparing yourself with somebody else to feel that "I'm okay as a person." It's amazing how in the course of the day, how often we compare ourselves to this person and that person, always finding somebody who is at least a little bit worse off than we are, so we can comfort ourselves with the idea that we're okay. Or you can focus on people who are way better than you are, and get yourself down in the dumps. Why the mind does that? What sort of satisfaction it finds there? Maybe it wants to say, "Well, I can't be expected to do such and such, because I'm nowhere near where that other person is." That fulfills a nefarious role in your attitude toward the meditation.

Passion for becoming, the desire to think about this little world of thought, that little world of thought: We keep these thought worlds, these attack dogs, either for the purposes of using them against other people or for our own entertainment. Because part of us feels if we didn't have these forms of passion, we wouldn't have the impulse or the ability to survive. If we didn't nurture our sense of righteous anger, we wouldn't be able to fend off injustice. One of the lessons the Buddha taught is that you don't need to have these defilements in order to survive. You don't need to have them in order to work for what's right. And they're certainly no help in training the mind.

There are a few you can use a little bit—as when Ananda talks about using conceit to give you confidence in your ability to handle problems in meditation, or when you use your passion for becoming to create good states of concentration, or irritation with your unskillful mental thoughts to get rid of them. So they do have their role, but you've got to watch out for the totally unskillful roles you give to these attack dogs. If you keep feeding them, they're going to expect to be fed all the time. When they find they can't get fed in your meditation, they attack. And part of you pretends that you haven't been doing anything, you don't know where they came from, these are cosmic forces over which you have no control. But you've been feeding them all throughout the day.

You've got to watch out for that. Remind yourself: You're not Snow White living with seven cute and helpful little dwarfs; you're a suburban menace raising seven attack dogs over which you have no control.

This is why the Buddha taught restraint of the senses. As you look and listen and think in the course of the day, ask yourself, "Is this really helping in the practice, or am I feeding these attack dogs?" Years back, when Ajaan Suwat was asked about how to bring meditation into the course of your daily life, he focused on the issue of precepts and virtue: *Sila* is the Pali word. Ordinarily when we think about precepts, we think primarily about the five precepts. And that is one level of restraint, which is important for reining in some of these attack dogs. But *silā* has other levels as well. Restraint of the senses is a kind of *silā*, as is purity of livelihood. Reflection on how you use the requisites is a kind of *silā*: Before you use food, clothing, shelter, and medicine, you ask yourself, "Why am I using so much? Is it really necessary for the purpose of the practice?" As the Buddha realized when he was leaving his period of austerities, you do need to feed the body and treat it well enough so it has the strength to give rise to good states of concentration. But you have to be careful not to overindulge, because otherwise the *anusaya*—this obsession—of sensual passion gets fed and gets used to wanting more food.

So these various levels of *silā* are important parts of the meditation. We do the reflection on the requisites after as a group at the end of the day here. But it's important to keep that reflection in mind as you go through the day. That, combined with restraint of the senses and your general observance of the precepts, is what helps keep these attack dogs in line. It forms the kind of past karma that will be useful past karma when you're sitting here and meditating. If you haven't been feeding the dogs all day, and you've been alert to noticing when you're tempted to feed them, then you'll be more alert to them as you sit here and meditate. And that way they won't suddenly take over your meditation and devour it.

Which means that this is an all-day, all-life practice. Many of us start out thinking, well, it would be good to have some stress reduction, or good to meditate in order to calm the mind down a little bit. But as you calm the mind, you find more and more that the peace coming from meditation is the only true form of happiness. *Natthi santi param sukham*, as the Buddha said: There is no happiness other than peace. The more you appreciate that, the more you realize what a full-time job it is to keep the mind peaceful, especially in modern society where there are so many demands on our time—and the media use so many tricks for feeding our attack dogs, because they want to make money off of our attack dogs, and rarely care who gets bitten in the process. You've got to watch out for that.

At the same time, there's the general modern tendency to want to simplify everything. "Meditation is just stress release," or "Awakening is just getting the mind really still." There is that story of the woman who had a stroke, who describe it as her "awakening," and everybody likes to believe that's all it is, just cut off the left side of your brain, and everything will be okay. But the practice has lots of ins and outs, because past and present karma interact in lots of complex ways, requiring that we give them our full attention if we're really serious about finding true happiness for the mind.

And after all it is your true happiness that you're after here. It's not like you're being sucked into some brainless cult. You're being asked to take your true happiness seriously, which you'd think people would do naturally. But they don't. The culture mitigates against it, and a lot of our own internal dishonesty mitigates against it. So it's going to take a while. It's a complex process to undo these tendencies, to undo these habits, these obsessions that we've developed. It's a full-day, full-lifetime process, but it's worth it. Because you ask yourself, if you're not giving yourself over to true happiness, what are you giving yourself to? You're just becoming food for your attack dogs.

If you don't learn how to stop feeding them, they'll just keep feeding on you again and again and again, all day long, all life long, endless numbers of lifetimes long. You have to ask yourself: Do you want to be subject to this all the time, or would you rather be free? When you're free, you're not the only one who benefits. There's an interesting passage in the Canon where Mahakassapa was talking to Ananda, saying that during his first seven days as a monk, he ate the alms food of the country as a debtor. But beginning with the eighth day, when he gained full awakening, he was no longer a debtor. That's because as an arahant, he had a totally different relationship to food. When he was eating food, it wasn't his attack dogs eating. He was simply eating out of the knowledge that he was going to stay alive long enough to live out his time, and was feeding to keep the body alive and useful during that period.

A standard phrase in the Theragathas is one the arahants say: "I don't delight in living, don't delight in dying; I live out my time, waiting my time as a worker waiting for his wage." So the arahants eat without obsession and in doing so, as they use the requisites, the people providing the requisites gain a huge amount of merit. In fact, that's supposed to be one of the motivations we have for the practice, is that those who support us will gain a great reward so that our consumption of things is actually a gift. That's an amazing thing. For most of us consumption is just consuming then it's gone, taking, taking, taking. And then to compensate for that, we try to give back something. But with the arahants, just the fact that they are so pure means that as you provide them with the requisites, anyone who is in any way involved in providing the requisites will gain huge rewards.

So their consumption is actually an act of generosity. It's an act of giving. It's a very special way of living, so that instead of attack dogs eating, it's all giving, giving, giving. As that comment Ajaan Suwat made once, when someone told him, "This Buddhism you guys teach would be really good if you had a god to give you a sense of comfort, support, as you go through difficult parts of the practice": Ajaan Suwat's response was that "If there were a god who could decree that by my eating everybody else would become full, I would bow down and worship that god." Well, awakening does that to some extent. The arahants, when they consume, they are giving. And if that's not miraculous, I don't know what is.