

# Keep Things Simple

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*September 2001*

When you meditate while listening to a Dhamma talk, don't listen to the talk. Focus on the meditation as much as you can. Give it ninety-nine percent of your attention. Leave only a sliver of attention for the talk.

The whole purpose of the talk here is not to distract you from the meditation but to act as a fence so that when the mind leaves the breath it runs into the talk and turns back to the breath. If anything in the talk is relevant to what you're doing in your meditation, it will come right in, echoing through your mind, without your having to try to pay attention to it. And if it's not relevant to what you're doing, you don't want it, anyhow. It may be relevant for somebody else. If it's not relevant for anybody in the room, it's probably for the speaker.

So leave the talk alone and focus as much as you can on the breath going in and going out. And put out of your mind all thoughts about how the last meditation went or yesterday's meditation went or how it was last week. Just focus on what you've got right here, right now. This is an important element in the practice: that you drop any concerns about how good or bad things have been in the past. Those concerns get in the way of the present moment. The same holds true for any anticipation about how you hope today's meditation will be. It gets in the way of what you're doing right now.

Meditation is a *doing*, you know. All too often we're looking for an experience. We want to experience this sense of ease, that sense of pleasure. But the Buddha's focus in the practice is on being skillful in doing - keeping mindful, keeping alert, being ardent in the practice, finding a sense of "just right." When they talk about the Middle Way, the middle-ness lies in the amount of effort that's just right for where you are right now, which sometimes may require a lot of effort, sometimes just a little bit. You supply whatever kind of effort is required: That's the kind of mental attitude you want to have. You're up for whatever is needed.

And you need to have a sense of what can be done right now. Sometimes you realize, okay, just a bare amount of concentration, a bare amount of mindfulness is all you can manage, so you stick with that. Don't throw it away simply because it's not up to your standards. As Ajaan Lee says, "Big things come from little

things," and sometimes very tiny victories can add up. You stay with this breath and then with the next breath and then the next. And even though you may not feel all that settled or secure, it's better than getting upset and saying, "Well, gee, this isn't amounting to anything; this is horrible," and then spinning out of control.

Take things one step at a time, whatever the step that's required. If it requires you to step up high, okay, you step up high. If it's simply a step along smooth ground, okay, you can step along smooth ground. But you take whatever step is needed, and whether it matches your idea of where you'd *like* to be right now, that's not the issue. The issue is that you're here, you're doing what's required, you're doing the best that can be done in this situation.

And as you stay with these little, tiny steps, they begin to take on more depth, more strength, more solidity. If you measure them against your idea of how you'd like things to be, you tend to throw them away. If you keep throwing things away, what do you have left? Nothing at all. Concentration starts out in little, tiny bits and pieces, which may not seem like much, but they're better than nothing at all. A lot of the skill lies in learning how to stay with those bits and pieces. That's all you have to do, just stay with them. They may not be impressive, they may not have lots of flashing lights or whatever you've experienced in the past, but they're the beginning, they're the seeds. If you stay with them, if you nourish them, they grow.

That's the sign of a discerning person: You make the most of what you've got. It may be a lot or it may be a little, but it's what you've got. It may change from day to day, so be alert to that, be sensitive to that. Accept whatever difficulties there may be in the situation and do the best you can.

So take whatever concentration you have. If it seems like a little, don't berate it for being a little. Just work with it. Whatever sense of ease you can get out of the breathing, just stick with that. Even if it doesn't seem to be the most wonderful breath you've ever had, well, okay, work with what you've got because these things do develop. If you give them time, they develop. If you've got a fruit on the tree—even if it's just a little, tiny, hard, green fruit—you keep watering the roots, fertilizing the soil, looking after the causes, and the results will take care of themselves.

Try to keep your efforts right here. In other words, don't think about the past, don't anticipate the future. What you've got will then have a chance to grow. It's a very simple principle but we tend to forget it. But it's by keeping things simple that the meditation works.

Look at the questions the Buddha has us ask. They're very simple questions. "Where's the stress right now?" And before you get to the stress, ask "Where can the mind settle down?" If the mind hasn't settled down, if it has no sense of ease,

you can't see anything clearly. So sometimes the only place it can settle down is with an ordinary feeling of okay-ness someplace in the body. Stick with that and then as things begin to grow, as they begin to get more solid and still, stick with the simple questions: "Where is the stress here?"

It's a question a seven-year-old can answer. At least, a seven-year-old can get his or her mind around it. So work with that. There are stories of arahants at the time of the Buddha who were seven years old. They weren't dealing with any abstruse philosophical issues; they were just dealing very clearly with what was going on in their minds. The questions were simple enough for them to comprehend, and they were happy to stick with those simple questions. "Where is there stress? What are you doing that's unnecessary and contributing to that stress?" When you can see, just drop it. That way your powers of perception get more and more precise, more and more subtle. But the essential question stays the same on each level of subtlety.

So if we keep things simple, the meditation becomes a lot more manageable. And it's this simple sort of questioning that helps see through the mind's subterfuges. The mind sometimes has a tendency to get more and more abstract and to want to deal with really fancy-sounding thoughts. It's like the emperor's new clothes. The person who's willing to say, "I don't understand this; this doesn't make any sense," can usually rip right through a lot of subterfuge, a lot of denial.

The things we think we understand, the things we think we know or at least we want to give the impression that we know: We have to learn to look behind them. Ask those simple questions. "Is that really so? Do you really know that for sure? What does that really mean? Is that a really helpful way to think?" Just keep asking these really simple, direct questions, and they'll help clear up a lot of confusion in the mind.