

# *Sweat the Small Stuff*

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In the course of our training, there are a lot of little things that we have to pay attention to—because if you don't pay attention to the little things, you miss the big things. Ajaan Mun once made a comment that it's very rare for a person to be blinded by a log. It's a lot more common for people to be blinded by sawdust. In other words, the fact that you're not paying attention to the little things can blind you.

This is an important principle in the practice. We're dealing with a large issue: suffering. But you're not going to see suffering if you just think about large issues all the time. When you're thinking about large issues, you're dealing in abstractions. And sometimes the abstractions can get too big to handle.

The biggest abstraction is this sense of "I am": "I am a good person; I am a bad person." If you feel that you're a bad person, you've got a lot of work to do to find the root of that badness. Most of us go swinging back and forth, feeling that we're perfectly fine, then we run across something that shows that we're not perfectly fine, so we run off in the other direction. We're miserable, we're hopeless. But neither attitude is helpful on the path.

This is why the Buddha—when he was about to teach his son, Rahula, how to meditate, even before he taught him the steps to breath meditation—told him to focus on the inconstancy of things so as to undercut the conceit, "I am." In other words, as you look at your own mind, you begin to realize that there are good intentions mixed up with bad intentions. If you look at the details, it's not a question of your having an underlying nature that's good or an underlying nature that's bad. You want to get away from the abstraction of "underlying nature" and simply look at what's going on. By paying attention to the moments when you catch yourself being unskillful, you work with that particular intention. You don't have to deal with your entire character all at once. Just see what's happening right here, right now, with that particular lack of skillfulness—because you can deal with individual events. They're not too much. They're not overwhelming. And as you develop this quality of being meticulous, you actually accomplish the training. You're developing the qualities needed for the path.

When we hear the word *conceit*—as in the conceit that "I am"—we usually think of it as meaning that we feel better than other people. But in the Buddhist sense of the term, it means any way that you compare yourself, set up yourself as an entity that is either good or bad in comparison with other people. It could be the feeling that you're worse than they are, or even that you're equal to them. Those are also conceits. And the conceit that you've got a really big issue you've got to deal with here and you don't have time for the small issues: That really gets in the way. So in this sense, the humility

that's required to say, "Yeah, I can change myself in meaningful ways through the small issues. I can change my habits, the habits of the mind here by attending to the details": That's the attitude that will see you through. That's the kind of humility you want. It's not the humility of saying that you're bad—because that's not really humility at all. Genuine humility is the humility that's willing to learn from the little things. That's what's useful in the practice.

Because after all the movements of the mind: What are they if not very little things? They're so quick that you can hardly notice them. This is one of the reasons why we deal with the little things on the external level first. Look at all the rules for the monks. Two big volumes, and that's just the distilled version. All the way from the big rules like not killing and not stealing down to the little rules like how to take care of your bowl, how to take care of your robe. And as Ajaan Suwat once pointed out, the rules are not just for the monks. Many of the monks' rules affect the way lay people are going to be interacting with the monks, in which case the lay people have to notice: Is this particular issue going to touch on a monks' rule or not. In that way the rules make the lay people more meticulous as well.

So as you learn to be observant of the little things around you, you're more likely to observe the little things inside. The little changes of the breath that indicate that greed has arisen, or anger has arisen, or fear has arisen: All too often we're aware of these emotions only after they've taken over the mind. But to deal with them most effectively, you want to be able to sense them just as they're getting started. And that requires that you be very sensitive to the subtleties of the breath—the subtleties of the feelings in the body that tend to go along with these emotions—so that you can catch them in time.

This is why focusing on the small things is not a distraction. I once encountered a person who had been trained in a Zen center who complained about our obsession with minutiae, as he called it. He saw it as a distraction from the big wide open emptiness, the big wide open liberation that's waiting when you stop focusing on little things. But it doesn't work that way. To see the deathless you have to be very precise in your powers of perception. After all, the deathless is always there. Why are we not seeing it? Because we're not sensitive enough. How do we become more sensitive? By focusing on the little things: those little movements of the mind that head off in a skillful or unskillful direction. How do you nurture the skillful ones and how do you get rid of the unskillful ones? That's the big question.

So if you're dealing only with larger abstractions, you're going to miss the details because the larger abstractions say that the big deals are more important. There's that saying, "Don't sweat the small stuff, and it's all small stuff." Well there's some small stuff you gotta sweat. Humility is a lesson, humility is the quality that allows you to admit that there are lots of little things you've got to learn. You don't let yourself feel exasperated if they seem elementary or if you find yourself going back to the beginning again and again. Each time you go back to the beginning, you learn new things.

It's like going back and reading Ajaan Lee. I've personally found that with many of his writings, if you go back and read them again after a month or two, you see new things. It's the same book but you're a different person. You notice different details. The same principle applies to the breath. You keep coming back to the breath, back to the breath, and you begin to see more things over time. The process may be gradual, so gradual that you hardly notice. The image in the Canon is of a carpenter using a hammer. He knows that as he holds the hammer and uses it every day to pound away at the nails, the handle of the hammer is getting worn down. In any one day he can't measure how much it has been worn down, but over time he begins to see the wear marks. Someday it will wear completely through.

It's the same with progress in the mind: Sometimes it's incremental, but that doesn't mean it's any less real. The important thing is to be willing to learn the little things, notice the little things, master the little things, because it's in mastering the little things that the larger issues become clear. If you try to tackle the big issues right away—your basic character flaws or whatever—you're dealing mainly with abstractions, and abstractions can hide all kinds of stuff. They may sound big, important, impressive, but when you actually look at them, you see that there's not much there. They're a smokescreen: The important things are hidden, and all you see is the smoke.

So try to develop the attitude that you're willing to learn any lesson, no matter how small. And that's the attitude that will see you through.