

Over & Over Again

August 23, 2004

One of Ajaan Fuang's students once complained to him that she'd been meditating for many years and seemed to be doing the same thing over and over again. And he said, "That's the whole point. You're laying a foundation, and you want to make sure that the foundation is solid. Once the foundation is solid, then you can build a building of any number of stories and it won't fall down. If your foundation is weak or unstable, then you can't build anything on it at all. The higher you try to go, the bigger the crash when things come falling down."

So keep to the basics, keep it simple. When something new comes in the meditation, watch it for a while. Learn to be patient. Don't think about how many days you have here ahead of you, or how many years you've been meditating already. A lot of the important work comes from sitting with the meditation for a long period of time and just watching.

Don't be in too great a hurry to squeeze it on to something else. After all, your ideas of where it's supposed to go are often based on ignorance, so you're going to squeeze it off into a place you don't know, squeezing it through expectations that are ignorant, which is not a good way of going about it. You want to watch and watch again. And watch again.

An image Ajaan Lee likes to use is of going over a path again and again and again, back and forth, back and forth. The more you go over the path, he says, the more you see. Little things you missed the first couple of times, you begin to pick up as you go along. You get more familiar with the path. You learn to recognize what plants are growing on the side of the path, which ones are edible, which ones are not, which ones are medicine, which ones are food. The path gets worn smooth and, at the same time, you get really familiar with everything around the path. That's the kind of meditation we're doing.

So the breath comes in, the breath goes out. It's not like you've never seen the breath before. But in one way you have to act as if that's just the case: Look at it with new eyes all the time. But you're going over the same territory again and again and again. Don't count the number of times you've done it. Just keep reminding yourself: If you haven't seen awakening yet, if you haven't seen the deathless yet, you haven't seen everything there is to see right here. So you look again, and you look again.

And you're willing to be patient. Heedfulness and ardency don't mean that you have to be in a rush. They mean that you do your work carefully. You have to be meticulous about it.

The mind has its seasons, just as plants have their seasons. Some things take

a long time to grow and to ripen, other things ripen fast. You can't choose which qualities in your mind are going to be the fast ones and which are the slow ones. All you do is keep looking after the mind: tending to it, watering it, giving it fertilizer. If you treat it the right way, it'll grow, without your having to squeeze it or pull it to make it grow faster. You make it grow faster by tending to it properly.

There may come a point where you're adding too much water, too much fertilizer, so you have to be sensitive to that, too. Otherwise your plant will die. But the only way you can get a sense of "just right" is by being very observant and going over the same territory again and again and again.

So figure out ways to enjoy the process, so that it doesn't become tedious, so that it stays fresh. Then do it again and again and again.

Someday as you're walking down the path, you'll stumble over something valuable. It's there. It's simply a matter of being meticulous and ardent and sensitive to what's going on. Some people are quicker than others, but that's not the issue. It's simply a matter of being very watchful and patient.

Another analogy is of polishing wood. The grain is there in the wood but you have to polish it—back and forth, back and forth, back and forth—before it begins to gleam. You don't create the grain. If you try to draw a grain on the wood it doesn't look right. It's simply the back and forth, back and forth, back and forth of the polishing that brings it out.