

Thinking Your Way to Stillness

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Ajaan Suwat often recommended that we start each meditation by developing an attitude of conviction and confidence in what we're doing. Meditation, he said, was a high level of work, something we should feel inspired and fortunate that we have the chance to do. So, as you meditate, you don't just go through the motions. You give it your whole attention. You give it your whole mind, your whole heart.

The confidence, here, doesn't necessarily mean we're confident that it's always going to go well every time we meditate but we *are* confident that we're doing something good and that regardless of the immediate results, the long-term results will have to be good.

And in the meantime we learn.

Meditation is not a crap-shoot. You do have the opportunity to observe what you're doing as you meditate and the results you get, and through that you get a better and better sense of your mind. Awakening, again, is not a fluke occurrence. It comes through knowing your mind thoroughly—knowing what kind of intentions it has, what kind of results they give—and that kind of knowledge goes through many levels. It's not an all-or-nothing sort of affair. The image the Buddha gives of the continental shelf off of India: There is a point where our awakening is sudden, but it doesn't happen without a gradual practice leading up to it. The suddenness is when all the factors of the path finally come together, but the gradual aspect of that is the part where you get more and more sensitive to what's actually going on in your mind, and your heightened sensitivity will enable you to see something that's happening all the time.

The way the mind takes the potentials from the past and shapes them into a present experience: We're doing that all the time. To make a distinction between a mystery and a puzzle, a mystery is when all the evidence is there and you've just got to figure out which pieces are important. The puzzle is when pieces are missing. Here it's a mystery: why we're causing ourselves suffering. Everything that we need to know is right here, both in terms of how things are caused and what can be done to put an end to the suffering. It's simply we haven't figured out which things are most important to know. At the same time, our gaze isn't steady enough, our sensitivity isn't refined enough. So we're missing things that are right before our eyes. But, over time, the meditation does develop the sensitivity you need.

Sometimes the progress can seem so gradual that it doesn't even seem like

progress at all. Sometimes you can actually see the mind regress, when it goes from a fairly quiet mood to a totally scattered, distracted mood. But the mind is a complex process, and complex processes have their ups and downs. Still, there's a gradual tendency to improve if you stick with the meditation and apply as much attention as you can to what you're doing, asking the right questions. The questions are what change simple awareness into discernment: figuring out what's a cause, what's an effect; which causes are skillful, leading to good results and which causes are unskillful, leading to bad results.

That set of questions should always be in the back of your mind. They're the ones that will eventually lead you to see things in terms of the four noble truths: looking at what's going on simply as events and connections between events, seeing what the events do, and learning how to use that knowledge for the purpose of putting an end to suffering.

So meditation does involve some thinking. It's not simply being barely aware. You're aware, but you're also questioning, curious, trying to see what works.

Sometimes you need to engage in some thinking to get into concentration as well.

There's a passage where Mahanama, who was one of the Buddha's cousins, came to see the Buddha and said, "The monks are leaving. I need a lesson on how to practice while the monks are gone." It was nearing the end of the Rains Retreat, and the monks were working on their robes. As soon as they were finished their robes, they were out of there: going off into the forest, going off into the wilderness. Mahanama wanted some lessons to keep in mind while they were gone. He said, "What dwelling should I use for my mind?" The Buddha recommended six recollections: recollection of the Buddha, the Dhamma, the Sangha, virtue, generosity, and devas. He said to keep these things in mind while you're living at home with your children and you'll find that it will lead the mind to a sense of well-being, a sense of confidence, and from that sense of confidence the mind will eventually get concentrated. So these are ways of thinking that actually lead the mind into concentration. They're a kind of right resolve.

There's another passage where a monk is out in the forest. He's sitting in his little forest hut, but instead of meditating properly he's thinking thoughts of sensuality, thoughts of ill will, thoughts of harmfulness. A deva comes to him and says, "You're not attending appropriately the way you should be. You know how to get the mind back into right resolve, so think of the Buddha, the Dhamma, the Sangha, virtue, generosity."

So these forms of meditation are a type of right resolve, and right resolve is meant to bring the mind to concentration. This is a theme we find throughout the

Canon. Not only does right resolve build on right view but it also aims at right concentration, getting the mind to settle down.

There's another passage where the Buddha says you're trying to focus on the breath, trying to focus on the body in and of itself, or feelings in and of themselves, or any of the four establishments of mindfulness, and you find that the mind simply won't settle down. In his terms, there's a fever, a restlessness. So to allay that fever, you think of any one of these themes.

For instance, you can think of the Buddha: how fortunate we are that we have his teachings still alive and what an amazing person he was. He was destined for a life of power, wealth, and sensual pleasures, but he decided that that wasn't what he wanted. So he left it all and went off into the forest. We see very little of that today.

When the Buddha found the true happiness that he did want, he came out and he taught it freely. He walked all over northern India. Anywhere there was anyone ready to learn, he would go there and he would teach. Even on the last day of his life, there was one more person he knew he had to teach, and even though he was suffering from dysentery he walked many miles. That night the one last person came, a wanderer called Subhadda, and soon after the Buddha taught Subhadda he passed away. There he was on his deathbed and he still taught. That's the kind of person the Buddha was. That's the sort of person who found the Dhamma we're practicing.

You could think of similar ways about the Dhamma and the Sangha to get yourself inspired about what you're doing here. As for yourself, sometimes you've got to get yourself inspired about yourself as well. That's what the reflections on virtue, generosity, and the devas are all about. You look at your precepts and you realize you're not harming anybody as you observe these precepts. The ability to live a life that's harmless is a rare thing in this world. We don't have to fight anybody to gain our food, clothing, shelter, or medicine. We don't have to push people out of the arena. We live off people's generosity, things that they've freely given. So our livelihood is pure, not killing, stealing, engaging in illicit sex or wrong speech. It's rare to be able to live this kind of life so that you can look at your behavior and say, "There's nobody I've harmed," and allow yourself to feel joy and well-being over that. That gives energy to the practice.

A similar principle with generosity: You can think about the times you've been generous in the past, to remind yourself that you're not a weight upon the world and even though there are times when you have operated out of selfish motives, there are other times you gave freely. Remind yourself of that. You do have some goodness.

The recollection of the devas is a similar sort of thing. You think about the qualities that lead people to become devas and reflect that you have those qualities in yourself: a sense of shame over the idea of doing something evil, a sense of compunction that you wouldn't want to engage in evil. Virtue, generosity, conviction, wisdom: These are all qualities that lead people to become devas, and you've got them, to at least some extent.

The Buddha says that if you reflect on that, your views get straightened out, both about the Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Sangha, and about yourself. Remind yourself that this is a good path to be on, and you're a worthy person to be on this path. That gives rise to a sense of confidence, a sense of well-being, and then through that you can get the mind to settle down and be still, get concentrated.

You read sometimes about people who are afraid of concentration. The mind actually gets concentrated and they feel somehow that they don't deserve it, or that it couldn't really be the kind of concentration the Buddha's talking about. A lot of people, especially in our society, go around feeling unworthy. So here's an antidote to that: We're on a worthy path and we're worthy of the path. This is one of the ways in which right resolve—the resolve to think in ways that lead to renunciation, a lack of ill will, and a lack of harm—gets the mind in a position where it's ready to settle down and be still.

So you can think your way into concentration. Focus on the breath. You evaluate the breath. There's thinking even in the first jhana, as you direct your thoughts to the breath and evaluate it. Notice which ways of breathing feel really good and how to take that good feeling and let it spread around the body, to soak through the body. All you have to do is sit here and breathe. Be with the body sitting here breathing. Have the body drenched in ease, fullness, refreshment. That's right resolve on a higher level, thinking on a higher level.

Again, it's part of this process of thinking your way into concentration, getting yourself in the right mood, having the right attitude to what we're doing here, because this kind of thinking is useful in getting ready—and it's also useful in that it's easy to let go. If you come into the meditation with all sorts of unskillful thoughts about yourself, about the practice, those are hard to let go. They're sticky. It's as if you're holding on to a branch and the sap on the branch sticks to your hands and then that makes the branch stick to your hands. You try to throw it away and it's hard to let go. Skillful thinking, though, is like a solvent that can wash away that sap, and when the solvent evaporates, there you are: ready to settle down and enjoy the concentration with a sense of confidence and conviction that this is really good, and you're really fortunate to be able to do it.