To Be Your Own Teacher

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Once when I was in Thailand, I happened to attend a funeral for Ajaan Kokaew, who had been a student of Ajaan Sao. During the funeral I met a monk who mentioned to me that he knew he couldn't live with any ajaan. He was too bullheaded and would get into a lot of trouble. He wanted to go off and stay in the forest by himself. So he had gone to Ajaan MahaBoowa and asked him, "How can I make sure that my practice doesn't go off course?" And Ajaan MahaBoowa responded with a standard teaching in the Canon about three practices that can't go wrong: restraint of the senses, moderation in eating, and wakefulness.

So as you're looking after your own practice, learning to be more and more responsible for looking after yourself, it's good to keep these three principles in mind. When you keep them in mind, you're a lot less likely to go off course.

The first one, restraint of the senses, is defined as learning how to see the little things that set the mind off. When you look at something, what are the details that set you off? And then you learn how not to focus on those details. Notice this means that instead of putting blinders on yourself and not looking or not listening to things at all, it means that you really examine the *way* you look and the *way* you listen, trying to find, when you look at something, what exactly is it that excites your lust, or excites your anger? And the same when you listen. What precisely are the features of what you're listening to? It may be the tone of voice that sets you off, or it could be the actual things that are being said. And so on down the line with all the senses. You try to look more carefully at how you look and listen, sniff aromas, and taste flavors.

When you do that, you begin to see that the little details don't really amount to much.

There really isn't much there to get worked up about. You start looking around the details and you begin to see that there's a lot of stuff that, instead of exciting your lust, would discourage it; instead of exciting your anger, would calm your anger. Which means that you have to look in a more all-encompassing way; you have to listen in a more encompassing way. Note, though, that if you find the little details still set you off, just learn not to focus on those details. Focus on something else, something that might be neutral or actually counteracts the response you have to the original details.

But as you work more and more with this principle of restraint of the senses, you come to see how the little details that set you off are really very minor, very incidental. If you look at the process of how the mind goes about looking and listening, you see that the details themselves are not that much. Your motivation to go looking and listening to begin with: That's one of the big problems.

In this way this practice turns you back more and more on the mind and its intentions. That's when you begin to see that process of flowing out that Ajaan Lee talks about. He says, you have your basic awareness, then the mind goes flowing out. And the flow is the *asava*, it's the effluent there. It's either sensuality, views, becoming, or ignorance—one of these four—that causes you to go flowing out after sights and sounds, smells, tastes, tactile sensations, and

ideas.

So when you engage in this practice and keep after it, you find that there is lots of material for practice all throughout the day, even when you're doing other things aside from sitting and meditating. There's a lot to contemplate about how you're going through life, what motivates the way you engage in the world. If you see something unskillful, you figure out ways to keep it in check either by simply saying No to it, or after a while of saying No again and again and again, you begin to see there's a kind of pressure that builds up behind the impulse. And the more you acknowledge the pressure, the more it will explain itself. The mind will start making demands. If it insists on that piece of candy—eye candy or ear candy or nose candy, whatever—you can start understanding it better, where it comes from, and why.

So this is a good practice, not only for getting the mind to learn how to avoid the issues that would disturb its concentration, but also to gain understanding, gain discernment into how it tries to look for food in the senses, and learning how to do it more skillfully.

Moderation in eating means that you watch what you're doing while you eat. Notice your motivation for wanting a little bit more of that food, a little bit more of this. It's a good exercise for figuring out: Exactly at what point are you really full? And the mind will say, "Well, I need more. After all, there's just one meal a day. I've got to stuff in a little extra for the evening, a little extra for all the work I'm going to be doing." And try saying No to that voice.

Ajaan Chah says to eat until the point where you know that in five more mouthfuls you're going to be full. Stop at that point and then just fill yourself up with water. To do this requires real sensitivity, noticing not only when you are full, but also when you're five mouthfuls away from full. And remind yourself of the advantage of not overeating. You're not weighed down. It's a lot easier to meditate soon after the meal. And you can begin to question what the mind's demands are on how much it needs and how much what it eats is going after the flavor.

This connects to restraint of the senses, in the sense of taste. When you're eating something, exactly how long does the good taste last in your mouth? Not that long. It's very short. At the same time, if there's a demand—"I need X-amount of calories, or X amount of protein or whatever"—experiment to see how much you really need. Try doing with less and less for a while, and see how the body responds.

So in this way too, moderation in eating gives you a chance to improve the conditions for concentration and to gain some discernment into your motivation: why you eat, what you're looking for when you sit down and start putting food into your mouth.

Wakefulness, in the texts, is defined as follows: During the day, divide your time between sitting and walking as you practice. In other words, give the whole day to the meditation. And then at night, spend the first watch of the night sitting and walking, trying to banish any sleepiness from the mind. During the second watch of the night, which is roughly 10 p.m. to 2 a.m., you rest. But when you lie down, you lie down mindfully, with the intention that as soon as you wake up, you're going to sit up. You're not just going to turn over and lie there, enjoying the posture of lying down. Then you spend the last watch of the night sitting and

walking again, trying to banish sleepiness from your mind.

Now you may find that you have to adjust this in terms of how many hours you personally need. But two points are important. One is that when you lie down, you lie down with the intention that as soon as you wake up, you're going to get up and immediately try to continue with the meditation.

During the rest of the day if you're not meditating, ask yourself why. You may have some good reasons. You've got chores to do, this and that, but you can meditate while doing the chore. And if you don't have a good reason for not doing formal meditation, make it a habit that you just drop whatever it is that you're planning to do. This way you can ride herd on yourself, so the ajaan doesn't have to ride herd on you. You become more responsible in your meditation.

Ajaan Fuang describe this as being like a teacher who keeps after the students, making sure that they do their lessons in line with the lesson plans for the day. Other people can't ride herd on you in anyway near the way you could ride herd on yourself if you really wanted it. You have to learn how to do this in such way that you don't push, push, push and then snap. Part of being a responsible mature meditator is knowing how much you can take. But you don't want to push your limits; you want to push the envelope. Our general tendency is for our idea of moderation to be pretty slack. So you could learn how to push yourself too hard for a while, and then back off from that a little bit until you find the point that's just right. And for each of us, this is going to be a different point in terms of how much sleep you need, how much you can push yourself in the practice. But the important principle is you learn to be responsible for yourself—because this is how discernment is developed.

All these practices are aimed at developing discernment. That's why they can be a guideline for someone who's practicing on his own or on her own. This is not just a matter of setting up rules and abiding by them, but it's also learning sensitivity to what's actually going on: what pushes you when you're looking at things, what pushes you when you're eating things, what pushes you when you're making your choices for what you're going to do each hour of the day. Learn how to question any impulses that seem to be unskillful, how to encourage the ones that are skillful, and how to ride herd on yourself in a way that really is sensitive to what's just right. For this ability to find what's just right is an extremely important principle in developing discernment.

So the more you can become your own teacher, the better. The discernment that's involved in becoming your own teacher is going to be essential for release. Discernment is not just a matter of seeing things in line with the texts; it's a matter of learning how to watch your own mind, question your impulses, look at your intentional input into any situation. And the best way to see that intentional input is to start asking questions about when it's skillful and when it's not. As you get more and more sensitive to what's skillful, more and more sensitive to what's unskillful, your powers of observation become more and more refined. You become sensitive even to the slightest intentions. And it's in seeing those intentions, skillful or unskillful, allowing them to disband at the appropriate time: That's when your practice allows you to see something more.