

Complexities of the Mind

July 2, 2010

We've come here to train our minds, and the human mind is the most difficult thing to train. There's a passage in the Canon where an elephant trainer is talking to the Buddha. He comments on how elephants are very easy to understand. He says within a week after he started training an elephant, he would have learned all of that elephant's tricks, and would've been able to outsmart the elephant. But human beings, he said—and then he shakes his head—they're *very* complex.

And the most complex thing about us is the mind. It's capable of all kinds of subterfuges, all kinds of ways of lying to itself, and has *lots* of strategies—which means that, as meditators, we need lots of strategies as well. We can't depend on one strategy to take care of everything.

We start with the breath because we need a good friend in the body. The breath is home base. We can't live at home all the time, though. We have to forage around. Or to put another way, we can't decorate our home *only* with a sofa. We need a kitchen, we need a bathroom, we need a bedroom—plus all kinds of furniture. When you go into the tool shed, you need all kinds of tools. The sofa is a good place to rest; it helps give you your bearings. The fact that you have a place to rest is important. But even though the breath is always available, the mind is not always willing to settle down there. For some reason, it wants to go sleep in the tool shed or sleep in the garage. So you have to figure out what's going on. This is why we need a variety of tools, a variety of approaches.

I know a woman who's an engineer. Told me about a teacher she had in school who taught her calculus. This teacher was famous for getting everybody in the class to pass. It was because she had many different ways of explaining calculus. She'd approach one problem from *this* side, and then tomorrow she'd approach it from another side, and then a third side, and then a fourth side—understanding that people's minds work differently, and that some students respond to one approach and others to the other approaches. But the fact that she was able to teach it from many sides allowed her to get everybody passed.

It's the same with the meditation. We've got a complex topic here, complex issues, and a few general principles that can see you through. But the way you apply those principles is going to have to depend on your own ingenuity. The Buddha said there are some problems in the mind that respond simply to watching

them. You just have to look at them and they wither away, like flowers left out in the sun: The sun doesn't have to do anything special. Just put the flowers there, and the sunlight withers them. But other things don't wither: If you put a rock out in the sun, it's not going to wither. You have to attack it with other tools.

This is why, even though the breath is home base, the Buddha taught lots of other meditation techniques. For times when the mind is discouraged, when you think that you'll never make awakening in this lifetime, the Buddha has you reflect on the Sangha: the people in the past who've gained awakening. It wasn't that they were born arahants, or that it was very obvious from the beginning that they were going to get there. Some of them had so many difficulties in the practice that they contemplated suicide. Yet they were able to make their way around those difficulties. Sometimes you read of their problems and they're a lot more intense than anything you've experienced—which should give you some encouragement, because the biggest obstacle in the practice is that belief that you can't do it.

This is a case where you actually have to think your way around the problem. Try to ferret out exactly which defilement wants you not to succeed, and why the mind gives in to that defilement. If you're attacked by laziness, the Buddha recommends contemplation of death—not to depress you but to encourage you to do something *right now*. Because death could come at any time, and it'd be a shame if you worked at the practice and then you were suddenly cut short when you hadn't put much effort into it, when you hadn't really tried your best. You'd be dying with a sense of regret. So he has you reflect, every day as the sun goes down: This could be your last sunset. Are you ready to go? If you're not, work on the mind. The same with the sunrise: Each time the sun rises, this could be your last sunrise. Are you ready to go? If not, work on the mind. Usually, though, when the sun is setting or when the sun is rising, we're thinking about other things. But it's useful to have this reflection in mind.

With lust, there's contemplation of the body, as in the chant we had just now. The chant itself doesn't do all the work, but it provides some fuel for your practice, it gives you food for thought: When you're feeling lust, exactly what is this object you're lusting after? You start taking it apart, and you see that in order to lust after it you've got ignore all kinds of things. Then you realize, the problem isn't so much the body, it's that the mind likes lust, it likes thinking about these things. Well, why is that? You dig a little bit deeper, and you get into its perceptions, the way it labels things: "This is beautiful. This is attractive. This is enticing. I like feeling aroused." Those kinds of thoughts. You can learn how to question those. This

brings everything back into the mind.

So you can't expect *one* technique, or *one* approach to do all the work.

It's like the guns they had in Singapore before World War II. They expected the Japanese to attack from the sea, and so all the guns in Singapore were pointing out to the sea. Well, the Japanese came overland, snuck up behind the guns. The guns were fixed in place, they couldn't be turned around, so they were useless. You've got to have your guns ready to swivel in any direction. If someone attacks you with a knife, you have to be prepared to respond to a knife attack. If someone comes at you with sweet words, you have to be prepared to resist the sweet words, because the defilements have all kinds of strategies. And you need a lot of strategies to respond.

The concentration here is food for the practice. But even though as food is important—as Napoleon said, an army marches on its stomach—it's actually not what wins the battle. Ajaan Mun, in his last Dhamma talk, made the comparison. He says all the other aspects of the practice are like food and other supplies for a soldier in battle, but discernment is what actually does the work. We're trying to develop our discernment. It takes time. And the development of discernment and the development of concentration have to go hand-in-hand, just as a soldier can't fight without food, but simply eating the food is not going to win the battle. In the same way, you can't really practice without concentration, yet the concentration, on its own, is not going to win the battle. You need both the concentration *and* the discernment.

A few days ago, I had the opportunity to get on a computer that had access to the Internet, and I checked some of the Google entries that had come to dhammatalks, to see what people were interested in, what were they looking for. And one of the most common topics was the levels of concentration. Once people hear that there are levels of concentration, they want to know: How do you get there? How do you know when you've gotten there? And yet, that concern can actually get in the way. The realization that there *are* levels is important to have, but how *you're* going to experience them is a very personal matter.

In the Canon, the Buddha talks about different ways that people experience the stages that go up to the point where the mind is finally settled down, fills the body, and the breath is still. I noticed the same thing listening to Ajaan Fuang as he taught lots of different people. Some people would get into good concentration *this* way; other people would come from another side. Some people had lots of little levels that they went through before they reached the spot where the breath

is still and the awareness fills the body; other people just had a few. Some people just went plunk right down. So there's no one map that works for everybody.

However, there are principles for combining concentration and discernment that can carry you through whatever levels you're experiencing. The first is to learn to observe your meditation. When you come out of meditation, don't just jump out. Stop to reflect: Did it work well this time? There *is* such a thing as good meditation as opposed to bad meditation. It should seem obvious, but there's a line of thinking that all meditation is just accepting whatever happens and not judging the meditation as good or bad. But you never learn anything that way. You have to accept what happens, but you also have to accept the fact that you had a hand in shaping what's happening. So when the mind really does settle down, you want to stop and reflect *after* you come out: What did you do? How did you focus on the breath? Where were you focused? What feelings surrounded the mind as it began to settle down? To what extent can you recreate that?

The next time around, you want to try that. See if you can recreate it. Ask yourself, what did it feel like? What were the steps going in? You want to learn to recognize a particular state of concentration. And since you haven't experienced the whole map, you're not going to be able to apply a label with 100% assurance; but you *can* put a post-it note on it: "This felt good." How did it feel good? Use your own language; use your own description. After all, it's *your* mind.

Then, the next time you sit in meditation, ask yourself, "Can I go *straight* to that point, the spot where I seemed the most settled? Can I recreate the sense of the breathing that I experienced then?" If you can't, then just drop your reference to the past and explore, "Well, what feels good now?" But if you *can*, then the next step is to learn how to maintain that state. How long can you stay in that state of concentration? After all, you want to be able to observe it, and the best way to observe it is to stick with it for a good long time. You'll get to see that there are fluctuations in it: when it wobbles, when it doesn't quite stay settled.

If you're able to get back on track, you're like a person who's walking a tight-wire: it's not that you walk a perfectly straight line across the tight-wire. There'll be a little wobble here, a little wobble there, and your ability to regain your balance is going to teach you a lot about the mind and exactly what's going into that state of concentration. In the course of doing this, you find that some of the wobbles actually don't take you out of the concentration; they put you in a deeper state. And those descriptions in the Canon are useful for giving you some ideas of what might bring that deeper state about.

It's not the case that you put together the five factors of jhāna—a pinch of directed thought, a little evaluation, a little one-pointedness, a little pleasure, a little rapture—as if you were making a cake. You can't put them together as ingredients. The descriptions of jhāna are not recipes; they're descriptions of what the finished dish is going to taste like. You have to work on your own to figure out what you're doing, what your mind does as it reacts to your efforts to bring it to concentration. The descriptions in the Canon are there to serve as mileposts, and they give you some suggestions as to what you might want to look for as the mind goes from one level of concentration to another, as to where the differences might be.

For example, from the first to the second jhāna, you drop directed thought and evaluation. Why do you drop them? Because the mind has settled down so thoroughly with the breath, and the breath doesn't need any more tending—in the sense that it doesn't need to be questioned, probed, adjusted—and you can stay with it just as it is. As you stay with it that way, the mind begins to gain a sense of oneness with the breath. That's one possibility.

As you're maintaining the meditation, you find that the levels of stillness go up and down, and they wobble a bit, and they stay steady for a while, and they wobble a bit more. The question is, can you see any rise and fall in the level of stress? Once you've been able to get settled into that state of meditation, the final step is to ask this question: What stress *is* there in this state? What are you doing to make the stress go up? Try to detect moments where the level of stress goes down. Well, what did you do *then*?

Then you find that you go to a deeper state of concentration. If you see what you're doing to increase the stress and can stop doing it, you go to those deeper states. Then the whole process turns around again: Can you recreate it, can you maintain it, can you observe it? Then you put another post-it note on it. Ultimately, it doesn't really matter which level you're on. The basic framework is always the same. Learn how to recognize what the mind is doing. Reflect on what worked, try to recreate it, try to maintain it. And then question it as to the way stress goes up and goes down, even in very subtle ways. That's how you develop your discernment: by detecting the stress that's there even in these states of stillness.

The questioning that ultimately leads to awakening is the same sort of questioning, about the fluctuations in the stress. And the practice with the different levels of concentration is what refines your sensitivities, allows you to

observe more clearly what's going on, so that you can catch things that otherwise you wouldn't have caught. Then you develop this habit of learning to look around and to reflect.

That's another reason why the breath is home base—because when you're in the present moment, when the mind is still, you can't help but see the breath. It's *there*. And the fact that the breath feels comfortable, feels nourishing: That's a sign that the concentration is right. So as the Buddha says, if you try to focus on the breath, or any of the other standard frames of reference, and you find either a sense of fever arises in the body—there's a sense of dis-ease, an inability to settle down—or a fever arises in the mind, you go for one of those topics that Ajaan Lee called places to forage.

So figure out the immediate problem that's preventing the mind from settling down. Try to give rise to a sense of well-being, a sense of *willingness* to settle down. Then you come back to the breath. And regardless of what the level is, or what you want to call it, or how many post-it notes you've plastered all over your mind, as long as you understand the basic principle that you're trying to understand the mind, look at it from different angles to see what works, to learn from your experience: That's going to see you through.

In this way, the different complexities of the mind get teased out. And as the mind gathers more and more, all the issues get brought into one little spot where you really *can* comprehend them. As I noticed when Ajaan Fuang was teaching, students would come from a variety of angles. He'd finally get them, though, to that state where the mind is still, the awareness fills the body, the breath is still. A sense of stillness and ease permeates everything. And from that point on, everybody's practice followed the same outlines.

This is probably why the Buddha said that Sāriputta trained people to be stream-enterers and that Moggallāna would train them to be arahants—which is interesting, because Sāriputta was the one who was known, primarily, for his wisdom. So the question is, why would he get people only to stream-entry, and then leave it to Moggallāna to get them to be arahants? It's because getting to stream-entry is more difficult, because people prior to that level come from all over the place. It requires a lot of discernment to figure out where they are, and where they need to go, and how they get there. But once they've actually brought the path together, then they're more able to look after themselves.

So as you're groping your way toward the spot where the path comes together, remind yourself: This is normal. It's going to be complex, and it's going to require a

lot of different strategies from a lot of different angles. But take heart in the fact that people who've been in a lot worse situations than you are have done it in the past. And whatever the difficulties, they always said the reward, when it's reached, is more than worth the difficulties. Far more. So much more that you can't even conceive it.

So take heart in the practice. It's always time well spent.