

Be Observant

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The key to meditation is being observant and knowing what things to observe. The Buddha sets it out all very clearly. You want to observe stress and what's causing the stress. You also want to observe what qualities of mind allow you to observe. That's the path.

There's a passage where he talks about noble right concentration and its seven supports, or its seven requisites, putting concentration right there at the center of the path. The concentration is what allows you to watch things, to observe things from a steady place. This is why we have to spend so much time working on this. It's like building an observation platform. If the platform is unsteady, you can't trust what you're observing. So the steadiness of the concentration is really important. You want to learn how to stay with the breath coming in; stay with the breath going out. Work with the breath so that it's a good place to stay. Otherwise, if it's not a good place to stay, the concentration is not going to be steady. It'll be wobbly. You'll keep wanting to wander off.

What else does the Buddha have you observe? He has you observe your actions, your intentions, starting with very simple things. This is why the practice is not just about sitting here with your eyes closed. It's also how about how you do everything, which is why, in the monasteries in Thailand, so much emphasis is placed on little daily chores of the day: being observant of the way you wash a spittoon, the way you wash your bowl, the way you sweep, the way you look after things. There are skillful and unskillful ways of doing all of these things.

The purpose here is to train you to be observant: to see what's skillful, to see what's not, to see the implications of, say, when you sweep a path in a particular way, you may be creating a rain channel, or you may be wearing the soil away. Figure out another way to sweep it so you're not having those effects. Simple things like this that may seem very ordinary and very unimportant, but they're not. They are ordinary, but they're important as well, because we do have this tendency to skip over things and go to what we think is more important: the big abstractions. But abstractions are very vague, and they make it hard for you to look at your actions. It's very easy to see your actions in the little things you do: how you speak, how you move. Then there are the manual skills that are developed by making brooms, learning how to dye your robes, noticing what works and what doesn't work.

Ajaan Lee draws a lot of analogies between learning how to meditate and learning manual skills. He says meditation is like learning how to weave. It's like learning how to sew, learning how to make tiles, learning how to take silver and shape it into different objects. You do something and then you see the results. If you don't like the results, you go back and look at what you did. Maybe there's a different way of doing it. A lot of lessons can be learned about meditation simply by learning how to sew.

This is how we overcome our delusion, this tendency to that we have to skim over things that we think are unimportant and yet really reveal a lot about the mind's attitudes, about its powers of mindfulness, alertness, and all the other qualities we're trying to develop as we meditate. So it's important, as you go through the day, that you notice what you're doing. Look around. Try to be observant.

If you do just what you're told, it's not enough. If you do just the absolute minimum, it's not enough. It may be enough to get by, but it's not really teaching you anything. If you're weeding, look for the weeds that haven't been pointed out to you. If you're sweeping up, sweep up the areas that tend not to be swept in addition to the ones that are. As Ajaan Lee used to say, "You're living in a monastery. Try to make your eyes as large as the monastery so that you see what's going on; see what needs to be done. If you have the extra energy, go ahead and do it."

This was a lot of my own training in Thailand. A couple of years back, a woman here in the States was taking two of us through the new library up in Seattle. I was noticing all the neat little architectural details, commenting on them. At the end of the tour, she turned to me and said, "You know, you're not like other monks I know. You're observant. You notice things." Which was one of the nicest compliments I've ever received, but it was disconcerting to think that other monks she had been dealing with were not observant and didn't notice things. I must admit that after my time with Ajaan Fuang, I've always thought of myself as being very unobservant. There was always something I was missing.

As long as you have that attitude, that you're not observant enough, you can put more energy into being observant. That's how the meditation grows—through little things like this—because the movements in the mind are even littler. That's how defilements start. Greed, aversion, and delusion start with little tiny things: little tiny ideas, perceptions, feelings. If your vision isn't all-around, they can start growing.

So come to the meditation telling yourself that you're here to observe. You're here to watch, which means when the meditation goes well, you watch it. When it doesn't go well, you watch it—not to be equanimous about it, but simply to learn.

At the same time, you're trying to build a good, solid observation platform. If you're thinking of putting it in a particular part of the body, learn to have several parts of the body where you can place it. Sometimes an emotion can come in. It'll have its physical correlate, so you want to be able to step out of the way, going someplace else in the body to place your observation platform to watch what's coming up.

So if you're not sure what's happening, what the thoughts are going to do or where they're going to go, remember that you want to look at your thoughts as actions with results. It's not that you're going to believe them or not believe them. You just want to look at them as actions. That means you've got to step out of the way.

The same with your emotions, whatever comes up in the course of the meditation—visions, insights whatever: You want to watch. Where do they go? Where do they lead? This is why Upasika Kee keeps saying: When you gain an insight, watch what happens next in the mind, to see how the mind reacts to the insight, what it does with the insight, or what the insight does to the mind. And then watch again, watch again. Don't jump to conclusions. This is how, bit by bit by bit, you're going to overcome your delusion, and how you keep yourself safe.

It's so easy when things come charging through the mind and you just go riding with them. But often they're like wild horses. You get on them and at first you think they're okay and the ride is exhilarating. And then you realize, "This horse is crazy." You don't know where it's going to take you. Sure enough, after a while it throws you. So you want a safe place to watch and look for the little things: the little details in the narratives, the little details that will show you whether this is something to be trusted or not. At the very least, you want to look at the narratives to see how you can learn not to get hooked by all the narratives that come through the mind. Learn how to put a little question mark next to them.

It's not so much the things we don't know that cause trouble. It's more the things we think we do know: the unknown unknowns. They're unknown and we don't know they're unknown. That's the problem. So remember, the little things do matter. You want to observe the little things. You think washing a spittoon is a little thing. Well, remember, the movement of a defilement in the mind is a lot smaller, but it can have huge repercussions. So don't underestimate it. It's interesting that the Thai word for underestimating is also the word for

heedlessness. So don't be heedless of the little things, because they can turn around and bite you.