

Alone & with Others

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Ajaan Fuang once said that when you're living alone, live as if you're with other people; and when you're with other people, live as if you're alone. Then he went on to explain: When you're living alone, make sure you have a clear schedule and that you stick by the schedule. Don't just follow your moods. That way, you create some order in your life that's beyond just what you feel like doing. Which is important, because often when you're off alone, your moods take over and you can get into some pretty strange feedback loops. So a clear schedule can help get you out.

When you're living with other people, he said to try to make sure that your meditation stays foremost. When you're finished with the jobs that have to come when you're living with a group, when you've finished working together, go right back to your meditation. Don't hang around and chat people up. And even when you're with other people, try to make sure that your inner center stays in place, wherever you've focused it in your body.

That way, living alone doesn't become a problem or an obstacle to your practice; and living with other people doesn't become an obstacle, because you've learned to develop a sense of balance. Particularly when living alone, there's a need to have an outside observer inside the mind.

This connects with a teaching that the Buddha gave his son Rahula, when Rahula was only seven years old. There's a tendency in Western Buddhism to divorce meditation practice from other more basic practices; or to divorce, say, adult Buddhism from Buddhism for kids. But when the Buddha was talking to children, he was serious. He wasn't making up a make-believe Dhamma just for them. He was presenting the true Dhamma in language they could understand, but the principles were all the same.

And the basic principle he taught Rahula was that you've got to observe your actions: You observe your intentions before the action, you observe what you're doing, and you observe the results that are coming while you're doing it and after it's done. This applies to your physical actions, your verbal actions, and your mental actions.

This is the first lesson in meditation: developing this sense of the observer and the evaluator, and knowing where to look. Your intentions are important and their results are important. And you can expect to see results in two time-frames: one, right while you're doing things, and then, two, over time, after the actions are done. That connects to an important principle in causality, that some causes give results immediately, some give results over time, and some do both.

As you're developing this ability to observe yourself, he says also to consult with other people. When you see you've made a mistake, talk it over, learn to be open about it. One

reason for this is that you can learn from other people who've already gone further on the path. Another reason is that the ability to be open about your mistakes is absolutely essential to the practice. If you hide your mistakes from other people, you start hiding them from yourself, you hide your defilements from yourself. That way, you're never going to be able to dig them up, and they'll just stay there festering.

As this principle moves inside, it becomes an important element in your meditation, the ability to observe what you're doing. Many of the forest ajaans recommend that, at the end of a meditation, you stop and think, "What went well tonight?" or, "What went well this morning? This afternoon?"—whenever you're sitting. "And when it went well, what might be the causes?" Sometimes it's things you're doing in the course of the meditation, and other times it's the way you live your life—the events of the day, the habits you've developed. It's good to stop and reflect, so that you can then take that as a working hypothesis and try it again the next time you meditate.

When you get the mind into a good state of concentration, after it's settled in and you can pull back a bit without destroying it, you want to pull back because that's where the insight begins. The analogy the Buddha gives is of a person sitting watching someone who's lying down, or a person standing up watching someone who's sitting. You've pulled back just a little bit and you can watch, "What is this mind doing?" That way, you can understand what's going on in your concentration and begin to observe different levels: different levels of subtlety in your focus, ease, rapture, equanimity, stillness in the concentration.

And although this is not in the Pali Canon, it's useful to put a post-it note on what you've noticed, because you have to remember you're still exploring. What may seem like a really refined, still state of concentration at one stage in the practice, may after a while begin to seem pretty crude as your powers of observation develop. Then you can start moving the post-it notes around.

In other words, you have to take a certain skepticism to what's going on. This is a quality I noticed in Ajaan Fuang: a healthy skepticism. If can't be skeptical about other people, you're not going to be skeptical about yourself, your own defilements. And "skeptical" here doesn't mean cynical, it just means waiting to see, waiting to judge, not coming to conclusions too quickly.

Or as Upasika Kee says, when an insight comes, don't just jump right in and put your stamp of approval on it. Watch and see what happens next, and then what happens next and next. Because the whole point of insight is not that you can frame your insights and put them on the wall. They're there to do something to the mind. So you want to see: What do they do? What do they help you let go? And when you've let go, what happens next? Does the mind jump in and build a lot of pride around it? Or is there a string of letting goes? This ability to hold back judgment and be a little skeptical: That's really important.

And again, this develops from the Buddha's teachings to Rahula. Some of the results of your actions will come right away, but the Buddha says withhold final judgment until the action is done and you've had time to see what happens afterwards.

This way, when you're alone, you really are not alone. There's someone else watching in the mind. This is when you can take advantage of the fact that the mind is like a committee. There are lots of different selves, lots of different intentions in there.

One of your intentions should be you want to be really careful, you want to be really heedful about what you do in the practice. And you want to make sure that it's really done well and really does give the results that can free the mind. And remember that the Buddha's sense of freedom is pretty radical. It cuts through time and it cuts through space in a way that really is liberating, that frees the mind from all restrictions.

That should be one of the intentions that you keep maintaining in the practice. That can be one of the committee members. And then the other committee members can be working on your concentration, working on your right speech, right actions, right views. But that observer that you've developed by following the Buddha's instructions to Rahula—you watch your intentions, you watch your actions, you watch the results: That's a committee member you want to sustain all the way through the practice, so that when you're alone it's as if you're with others. And you can balance the benefits of being both alone and with other people as well.