

Think Like a Thief

February 1, 2014

When I went back to Thailand, back in 1976 to ordain and stay with Ajaan Fuang, he gave me a piece of advice. He said that “To really succeed at the meditation, you have to learn how to think like a thief,” not that you’re going to break the precepts, but think about how a thief is going to steal something from someone’s house. You don’t come up to the front door and knock on it and say, “When are you going to be away? Where do you keep your valuables?” You’ll never get to steal anything that way. You have to watch, quietly; case the joint. Notice when they tend to be away and when they tend to stay at home, and what signals let you know where the valuables are kept, in which part of the house.

In other words, you can’t expect everything to be handed to you; everything to be explained to you. You have to learn how to figure things out for yourself. I had lots of lessons like this with Ajaan Fuang. When I was looking after his hut, there were right places and wrong places to put things, but he wouldn’t tell me where they were. If I put something in the wrong place, he’d let me know. He’d pick it up and throw it—not at me. I never got anything thrown at me, but it would be thrown. But he wouldn’t tell me where the right places were, so I had to learn how to sneak a look every now and then: When he placed things, where did he put them?

Or he’d tell me to do something and not explain how it was done. It was up to me to figure it out. As he said, there are reasons for everything the ajaan does. This is a lesson I picked up very quickly. Sometimes I see other Westerners who studied in Thailand. They didn’t get this part of the lesson at all. The ajaan would do something and they would just write it off, “Oh, that’s just the Thai way of doing things,” and leave it at that. But with Ajaan Fuang, the lesson was that there’s a reason. You’ve got to figure it out. He’s not going to explain everything to you. Sometimes it takes a long while to figure things out. But the fact that you’re trying to figure it on your own and you look for the reason, you learn a lot of lessons you didn’t expect.

It’s not that he didn’t explain anything at all. There were times he would take pity on me. After all, I was raised in a culture that was not Buddhist and some things that he had taken for granted, he began to realize, were missing in my background, so he’d explain them. But many of the lessons that stuck with me most were ones that I learned just by watching and figuring out, “Ah, this is why he does it that way. That’s why he does it this way.”

You develop your own powers of observation, and you learn how to make yourself a good judge of your observations. It's not just that you come to a conclusion and wrap it up and say, "Okay, that's taken care of." Sometimes you have to open the case again, and it requires that you get really still and try to look at things from many different angles.

All these are talents you're going to need in the meditation. After all, not everything is explained. Sometimes you'll hear of different meditation methods where they've got everything all laid out and they say it's all very scientific because everything is explained and mapped out. But that's grade school science. Real science is when you experiment. You pose questions and you have to learn how to pose a good question.

There was a Thai professor in the Thai university where I was teaching before I ordained. He'd come back to the States. He'd gotten his Masters here, and now he was going to come back to the States and get his PhD. He wrote to an American professor staying at the same university and asked what would be a good topic for his PhD thesis. The American professor was really upset. He said, "Look, it's up to you to figure out what a good question is. That's a large part of what it means to be knowledgeable." And it's the same in the practice: You've got to figure out what are the good questions and then how you should answer them. That's how real science is done.

So when you're meditating, there're parts that are all explained—how to do this, how to do that—much more than there were when Ajaan Fuang was starting out and a lot more than when Ajaan Mun was starting out. But still there are a lot of things that you're going to have to figure out for yourself because we each have our own misunderstandings and we have to figure out our own ways of getting around them.

And there's no step-by-step-by-step method for this, aside from reminding yourself: You've got to notice when things are not working and to figure out what's going wrong. Experiment for a bit to see what's going to work, because there are a lot of problems that come up in the meditation and the teacher's not going to be there. And if you're used to having everything handed to you on a platter, you're going to be sitting there waiting, "When is the platter going to come?" And it's not going to come. You've got to go down to the kitchen and fix your own food. And if there's no food in the kitchen, you've got to go out and grow it.

What this means is that you try to develop your powers of observation in daily life, and as you live here in the monastery, you see all kinds of examples. There'll be inspiring examples and not-so-inspiring examples. You take them as a

mirror: “If I acted in that way, what would it look like? What would be the results?” With some examples, it’s pretty clear: These are not examples you want to follow, so you let them go. You focus on the ones that are good, or at least seem good to you. Give them a try.

And it starts with everything. All the things we do around the monastery are opportunities to learn how to be skillful, to learn how to be observant—even simple things like putting things away. Where is the best place to put away plastic so that it’s not out in the sun? What is the best way to arrange things? Well, you look around, see how things are well arranged and not so well arranged and you think about it, even taking something as simple as keeping the place neat and clean as a lesson. You can then turn around and use the same qualities in your meditation.

So you have to be observant. As Ajaan Lee once said, when you live in a monastery, make your eyes as big as the monastery. That means simply that there’s work to be done and you should notice where the work needs to be done. But also notice what lessons are gained in doing that work: looking for lessons that you can turn around and then apply to your own mind. Where do you think Ajaan Lee got his ability to teach in analogies? He was constantly comparing the way his mind was with the way things are outside. When something was well done outside, could you take that lesson and apply it into your mind?

And don’t think that any lesson or any task is too small to provide you with a useful Dhamma lesson. Take Ven. Rahula as your patron saint. Rahula was the student that the Buddha extolled for being outstanding in his willingness to learn, his desire to learn. You can imagine the position he was in: Here he was, the Buddha’s very own son. He could have caused a lot of trouble, simply by being proud of who his father was. We do have that example of Channa, who had been the Buddha’s charioteer. He was really, really difficult. But Rahula wasn’t like that at all. He was willing to listen to lessons given to him by any of the monks and then take them to heart, to see which were the good lessons and which were not. He was willing to listen, listen, listen, and then figure out what would be the best things to train himself in. He was willing to train himself in all areas.

That was another thing that Ajaan Fuang mentioned when I was going back to ordain. He said, “Don’t think the practice is just a matter of sitting here with your eyes closed. There are lessons to be learned in doing everything—all your tasks, all your chores—skillfully. This is an all-around training.”

One of the words they use for people who take the Buddha’s teachings and awaken is *anubuddha*, literally means following the Buddha. And it’s not just a matter of following the words or following the instructions. You follow his

example as you pose questions to yourself: “Why am I doing this? Are these the results I want? Are they good enough? If they’re not good enough, how can I change my activities to make them better?” He looked at things from all sides. That’s why they called him the All-around Eye. You want to develop that same quality of having your eyes all-around as well.

There are lessons to be learned all around, some more useful than others. It’s going to be up to you to figure out which lessons are the ones appropriate for you right now. But don’t make an issue of where they come from. There are lessons to be learned from everybody. There are good examples and there are bad examples. There are lessons to be learned from simple things like keeping the place clean, keeping it well organized, noticing when something needs to be fixed, noticing when someone is lacking something—what you might be able to do to help fill up the lack. Be alive to these lessons, because then you can turn around and apply them in training your mind.