

## *A Valuable Gift*

*August 31, 2014*

Here you are focusing on your breath with your eyes closed. What are you doing for other people?

You're actually doing a lot. You're bringing your mind under control. The extent to which you can get rid of greed, aversion, and delusion inside yourself means that there's less greed, aversion, and delusion to inflict on other people.

And you're setting a good example: True happiness is found not by going out and trying to straighten out other people. It's found by straightening out your own mind, because the source of suffering is inside, in our own lack of skill. You can't make other people skillful, but you can train yourself to be more skillful. And in doing so, you set a good example and you have a more solid base to offer advice to others.

The extent to which you can improve the quality of your mind also helps to repay the debts you owe to others. As the Buddha said, one of the motivations for practicing is that if you can attain awakening, then all the good that other people have done for you comes back to them many times over. You're taking this body, you're taking this mind—this gift from your parents—and you're using it well. The merit goes back to them.

So there are lots of ways in which training your mind is really a gift. That means that if you're going to give this gift to somebody else, you want to make it a nice gift. If you're sitting here with your mind all over the place, it's not much of a gift. Try to make your mind one, here with the breath. Whatever way of getting the mind to settle down works for you, that's what you pursue.

There's no one right way of getting the mind into concentration. Each person's mind is going to find a different topic to be calming, although some topics can take you only so far, while others can take you farther. The breath takes you very far. You may find that you want to work with a few other topics first to get the mind in the right mood so that it's ready to settle down with the breath.

Sometimes it's good to think about the impermanence of life outside: All the things you've worked for, or are working for right now, at some point are going to be washed away, burned away, or just fall apart on their own. So where are you going to find any real happiness?

Or that reflection we had earlier, that we're all subject to aging, illness, and death, we haven't gone beyond aging, illness, and death: These things are a normal

part of life. Separation is a normal part of life. What do you have to hold on to when you're going to be separated from all that is dear and appealing to you?

Well, you've got your actions. And your actions come from where? They come from the mind. So that gives you even more incentive to get the mind to settle down here in the present moment, to work on the intentions of the mind. Because that's what we're working on here as we focus on meditation, getting into concentration.

The Thai translation for samadhi or concentration is firm intention: *tang cai man*. You're really right here. Your intention is to stay right here, and that intention doesn't waver. Whatever wavering you may have, you try to figure out some way to get past it, to iron it out, so that this gift you're giving to the world right now—the quality of your mind—is a gift of high value. It's not one of those gifts where if you have lots of thoughts then you have lots of gifts to give to others. It's the type of gift where the less there is, the higher the value.

Say you've got a durian, the fruit they grow around the area of Wat Dhammasathit. If the market is full of durian, your durian doesn't have much value. But if there's only one durian in the whole market, that durian's going to have a high price, and usually ends up being given as a gift to someone special.

So try to make your mind one here, as a good gift that you want to give to somebody special. Think about all the people with whom you have debts. Your parents are number one. Dedicate the quality of your meditation to them. It's a lucky parent whose child is a good example. So you want to be that good example. Then you spread that goodness out in all directions, so that the goodness you receive from the fact that you've got this human body, you can spread out to the world at large. This doesn't mean going out and running around teaching people, but it does mean being a good example and developing a quality of mind that's a good influence in the world. The mind has its currents, and when they're concentrated they can be strong. You want to use them in a good direction.

This is why we talk about not just plain concentration but *right* concentration: right concentration that's based on skillful intent—the intent not to harm, the intent not to pursue sensual desires. Because there is concentration that's wrong, concentration where you try to get power over other people. That creates lots of bad karma.

Here you're trying to get power over your own mind, realizing that your greed, aversion, and delusion—if they're not brought under control—can keep on creating trouble for a long time to come. We see this all around us, in people who gain positions of power. They've obviously got some good karma from the past, but how many people actually use their power well?

There was an ajaan in Thailand who taught one time about the three types of merit: the merit that comes from generosity, the merit that comes from virtue, the merit that comes from meditating. He was talking to a lot of people who tended to be happy to give gifts but weren't so interested in following the precepts or practicing meditation. So he told them that if you just give gifts but don't follow the precepts or meditate, then you have a good chance of being reborn as a dog in an American home. Your life is comfortable but you don't know much of anything and there's no opportunity to really do good with what you've got.

If you practice the precepts and are generous, then you have the opportunity to be born as a wealthy human being. But if you don't meditate, especially if you don't develop discernment, the wealth you have could actually be harmful to you. You could easily turn around and use that wealth in ways that are destructive to yourself, destructive to others. We see a lot of that around us. So you want to be able to develop discernment as well.

That requires that the mind settle in and be very still. Otherwise, your discernment is going to be just what you've read in books. It becomes a glaze covering up the opportunity to gain your own genuine discernment, which comes from developing your own powers of observation, getting the mind still and then watching it, in the same way that you get a child still in a classroom and give the child work to do. You've got to watch the child, because the child is probably going to want to do something else. If the teacher's gaze slips away, the child might run off or do something else besides the work that it was meant to do.

It's in watching for the tendency to misbehave—that's where you learn about your own mind. So here you've got the mind with a task to do, to stay with your object of concentration. Watch the mind to see when it's going to slip off, *why* it's going to slip off. That's where you gain discernment.

This morning I was asked a lot of questions by a woman who's read an awful lot in the Abhidhamma about the different states of mind. The words she had and the concepts she had were way beyond anything that she could observe for herself, and she was getting all confused. You've got to put that stuff aside.

Ajaan Mun's phrase was to take all the knowledge you've learned from your Dhamma textbooks, put it in a trunk, and put a lock on the trunk for the time being. Just watch your mind. If you want to learn about greed, watch your own greed. To learn about aversion, watch your own aversion. To learn about delusion, okay, look at your actions and notice: When you do something, what actually happens? When you change what you do, what happens? What's the difference? It's learning to make distinctions like this that you see that one type of way of focusing the mind is better than another way. One way of dealing with the breath

is better than another way. Some of the things you may observe may be true across time, and others may be true just for tonight. But you learn how to observe that as well.

We're here to test the Buddha's teachings, but in order to test them you have to make yourself into a good tester, someone whose powers of observation and circumspection are well-developed. That quality of circumspection is one that Ajaan Lee emphasizes a lot. In other words, if you gain an insight, you have to turn it around: To what extent is the opposite true? You don't want to just run with one idea beyond where it really applies. When an insight comes, the best thing to do is to ask yourself, "Can it be applied right now?" If so, you apply it and then you see what the results are. Don't immediately decide that whatever it is has got to be true. That belief that whatever comes up in a still mind can be trusted can't be trusted. You've got to test things. That's where the circumspection comes in. You test them and you test them again. That way, your knowledge of the ins and outs of the mind gets a lot more subtle.

This is how you take your gift to the world—which is the current of energy that the mind sends out, both while it's sitting here still and when it's using that current to speak or act—and you're making it a gift of high value, something you can be proud to present. You present this to your parents, you present this to all the people who've been good to you, all the people you respect. Then from there, you spread it to everyone.

This is how we improve the world, one person at a time. It's the only way that lasting improvements can be made.