

Practicing in Solitude

February 11, 2016

We don't have a heavy group schedule around here. The group sits are only twice a day. Work periods are twice a day. And there are large chunks of time where each person has time to be by him or herself.

The question is, how do you make the most of those chunks of time and not fritter them away?

Ajaan Fuang used to have a principle: "When you live with a group, act as if you're living alone. When you live alone, act as if you're living with a group."

The first case means that whatever duties have to be done together, you do them but then you don't then hang around and chitchat. When the work is done, you go back to your spot.

When you're living alone, he says, have a schedule. That's the advantage of group life: You're not just going by your moods. When the time comes to sit, you sit. When the time comes to walk, you walk. The advantage of having time by yourself, though, means that you can tailor the sitting time and the walking time to your own internal clock.

Ajaan Mun, for instance, used to like to stay up quite late. Ajaan Singh, one of his students, liked to go to bed early in the evening, wake up in the middle of the night and meditate through the middle of the night, then have a short nap before dawn.

That's the kind of thing you can do when you're meditating on your own. Each of us has a different metabolism. So when you have time by yourself, try to get a sense of your own schedule.

If you find that you're getting sleepy after a meal, don't lie down right away. Remember the Buddha's instructions on how to deal with drowsiness. You do a little chanting. You do walking meditation. If you find yourself still drowsy and tired while you're doing walking meditation, okay, then you can stop and rest.

The chanting is also important for other reasons. It gives you a friend as you go through the day. Think about all the earworms that get into your brain: stupid songs, stupid jingles that you've picked up. One way to counteract them is to add some more things to become earworms: Get some of the Buddha's teachings as an earworm so the chants are there in the background.

Look through the book of chants and try out some chants that we don't do as a group. You find that some chants are your friends. Some people like doing the funeral chants; other people like doing the long suttas. Some people prefer the

chants that have translations with them. It's really up to you. You've got the choice. But the chanting can be your friend.

As for reading, that's an individual matter. Generally, the less reading the better. But there are times again when you need a friend. We live in a country where wrong view is rampant. We've picked up all kinds of things.

Back when I was first ordained, I found myself living up on top of a mountain pretty much alone. I'd come down and see Ajaan Fuang in the evening. And while I was on the mountain, it seemed like I was going through all of my childhood all over again: issues even from grade school were coming up, to say nothing of high school and college.

So it's good to have some Dhamma there to give you some grounding, so that you can reflect on these things from a Dhammic standpoint: the teachings on karma, the teachings on rebirth, the teachings on learning how to let go of the past. In other words, use the Dhamma to reframe the issues you've been carrying around. That's what reading the Dhamma helps with.

Other ways you get help from reading the Dhamma include the fact that it gives you ideas for meditation you may not have thought of, like ways of dealing with the breath in the different parts of the body so that you have some variety. It's not just in, out, in, out. It's in here and out there.

If you've got a particular pain or disease, use the breath to work with that. If it seems that the breath can't go through the pain, remind yourself, "Well, what is breath?" You're trying to push some kind of energy through but maybe it's not breath energy. Breath energy should be able to go through anything.

After all, it's like electrons. There's all that space in your atoms. And the breath energy should be able to go through that.

So what's the mental image preventing it? What's bottling things up? Question that image. Or you can ask yourself, "Which side of the pain are you on? Are you on the top side, the left side, the right side?" In other words, where is the center of your awareness vis-a-vis the pain? Can you get on the other side? Can you be on both sides?

Reading can help get you to ask these questions to get you around some impasses.

In my own practice, I found there were periods when I was reading voraciously anything by Ajaan Lee that I could get my hands on, anything by Ajaan Maha Boowa. But then there'd be times when I didn't want to read anything at all. I found that if I'd been stuck in a particular stage or reached a kind of plateau, that's when I wanted to read. But when things were progressing on their own in the practice, I put the books aside. That was the general pattern. And it's a useful one.

In other words, when you hit a brick wall, then it's time to look around and get some ideas. But if the meditation is going well, put the books aside and learn from yourself.

Then there's the whole question of adding some variety to your day.

Ajaan Chob was famous for the fact that wherever he went, he'd always have two walking meditation paths. He'd switch back and forth between the two just to give himself some variety.

I know a lot of forest monks who've climbed mountains when things weren't going well in their practice.

If you're not up to climbing the mountain behind the monastery, just walk around the orchard a bit. Do your walking meditation along the roads. Make it a stroll. You don't have to go back-and-forth, just stroll around, but keep with your breath, keep with your body. Then, after you've had a stroll, go back and do some walking meditation on the path. See if there's a difference in the quality of the concentration. If there is, ask yourself why. What were you doing when you were strolling? What are you doing when you're doing walking meditation? What's the difference? Can you minimize the difference?

The important thing is that you learn how to read your mind. And if you realize you've set up a schedule for yourself that's not really working, okay, sit down and talk to yourself. Or as the mother of the Filipino family I used to stay with when I was an exchange student said, "Talk to your mind." And reason things out. At what time should you be sitting more, what time should you be sitting less?

It helps to have at least one really good long sitting meditation during the day. If you can have several, that's fine, but if you find that you're dealing with the pain too much for that long, then keep up with one long one but then have some other shorter ones, to give yourself some variety, so that not every sit is a marathon sit.

When you've worked out a schedule that seems to fit your needs, your metabolism, stick with it for a while. That gives some order to the day.

So it's basically a matter of finding a balance between order and variety. Let the variety come not simply because of your moods but because you've thought things through. If you need a change of scenery, okay, walk around the monastery. If you need a change of pace, adjust the times for your meditations.

You need a friend? Take Dhamma books and chanting as your friends, so that the internal chatter of the mind is not always the same old stuff over and over again. You're adding new committee members with new ideas, new attitudes, in hopes that they'll shake things up a little bit.

This way, you can make the most of the freedom you've got. Because for a lot

of us, having a big chunk of free time like this is daunting and almost a little scary. But as you gain a sense that you can handle it, then it gives you time to really look inside. And you have the tools to look inside so that you're not just thrashing around with your old emotions.

You work with the breath, get a grounding in the body so that you can step back from your thoughts and not be so entangled in them. You get more and more used to having this kind of freedom. And you can take advantage of it—because it's not the case that it'll last forever. But you've got it now, so make the most of it.