

Staying Power

August 28, 2016

When you're practicing on your own, one of the main problems is staying power—how you're going to stick with the practice, how you're going to keep up your original enthusiasm. The problems vary as to what situation you're in as you're practicing on your own. If you're back at home, the main problem is dealing with your priorities, your sense of values, what's important in life. All too often it's easy to let what's pressing replace what's important in deciding what you're going to do, because there's pressure all around—from family, friends, work.

Of course, the values that are being sold to us through the media are all very antithetical to the practice. So you have to stake out your own territory. This is why it's good to set up a little ritual every day—repeat some of the chants that talk about the facts of aging, illness, death, and the need to get your act together, to get your priorities straight. For the same reason, you can read passages in the Dhamma, listen to Dhamma talks to get a different voice in your head from the voices that say you have to worry about what's going on at work and how it has to take up all your time. It's amazing how little things at work, little things at home can take all your time, fill all your mind, and blot out any awareness of what the really important issues in life are.

And don't expect the media out there, the society out there, to remind you of the need for the practice. You've got to remind yourself on your own. So, as I said, set up a daily ritual. Take out a little time for yourself every day. Make it *your* time. And don't let the concerns of the world come crashing in. Keep reminding yourself that your time is very short, so you have to be very strict with yourself in not letting the plans for the day sneak into your meditation.

Years back, when I was taking the exams for young monks, I found I needed to stop and rest every now and then because I was learning a subject in another language—having to memorize passages that were both in Thai and in Pali. My brain was getting pretty fried. So I'd have to stop and meditate for a bit. I found that if even just a five-minute meditation break every now and then was really helpful. And particularly, as I reminded myself, "You only have five minutes, so you've got to be strict with yourself. No thoughts about the exam, no thoughts about what you're studying at all."

So in addition to your regular daily ritual, you might take little meditation breaks whenever you need them. Again, be really strict with yourself that those

periods of time are *your* periods of time—at the very least to give yourself some new energy, to give yourself something to revive your sense that you're in touch with the mind, in touch with the needs of the mind. Then do your best as you go through the day to maintain that sense of being with the energy of the breath as your grounding.

If you're going off on retreat and you're going to be alone, again, there's the problem of staying power. There's the initial enthusiasm of having all that time to yourself. Then, when the initial enthusiasm breaks down or peters out, that's when you've got to have other reasons to practice or to readjust your focus.

I've been reading recently about the exploration of the Transantarctic Mountains. The story started simply with the fact that people discovered the mountains existed. Remember: Exploring the Antarctic wasn't like Europeans exploring the rest of the world. When they explored the rest of the world, they had the help of the local people. It was very rare that they found something that the local people hadn't already found, or they forged a new path where there wasn't already a path.

But Antarctica was different. Nobody had been there before, except penguins, and the penguins weren't giving much advice. And the people didn't have aerial photographs, so it was totally a matter of gauging things by looking at them from the ground level. They tried to figure out how to get through the mountains, whether the mountains were just a chain or whether they were a larger area of mountains. And was there a continent behind the mountains, or were they simply a chain set in the middle of the sea? A lot of things they didn't know at all. Just finding a path through the mountains was quite an endeavor.

But they learned about the mountains in two ways. One was through their initial forays, just trying to find a path through them. Those are the people we tend to remember: Scott, Shackleton. They found the path and they were able to make a general sketch of what things were like. But then filling in the sketch was up to the people who came after them.

On one of the initial expeditions there was a geologist who went along, one who was both explorer and geologist. He did a little bit of the exploring and then he settled back and went back over and over again the areas where he had forged a trail to get real knowledge of the place, looking at the details of the rocks, taking samples. That kind of work has continued up to today. And it's still not done. Now, the names of the people who do that kind of work are not remembered. But a lot of the knowledge they've gained is a lot more valuable than just knowing how to get through the mountains.

So when you're settling down at the beginning of a retreat and things are going really fast, that's like Scott going through the mountains. Then you have to settle down and be willing to do the detailed work, checking the details of the strata of the rocks in your mind, trying to figure out what's going on. And it's the detailed work that gives real knowledge.

So learn how to take an interest in the details. Find them fascinating. And have the patience need to do the detailed work.

Years back, I had a friend who had married a Thai painter. At one point, he was working on two large paintings. She'd go in and check every to see how the work was going. One day in particular she walked in and said, "Oh, you haven't got much work done yet, have you, today?" He looked at her and said, "I've been working on this for five hours. I've been working on the little details in the clothing of one of the people portrayed in the picture." It was a lot of work, it took a lot of time, but she hadn't even seen it. Yet without the details, the painting wouldn't have been a Thai painting.

It's the same with the meditation. Without looking into the details of the work, you're not really going to see anything. The meditation will cut a few broad swaths through the mind, but a lot of the really important work will remain undone.

You have to have the kind of patience to see: When a thought comes into the mind, how does it come in? When it takes root in the mind, how does it take root? What are the stages? You have to learn how to do this patiently with every thought that comes in to invade.

The best way to learn about these stages, of course, is first to do what you can to zap the thought as soon as it arises. In other words, breathe right through it. Whatever tension is building up around the thought, breathe through that tension. Then sit back with the breath again and be very watchful. Ajaan Khamdee's analogy is that it's like being a hunter. You have to be very still, but very alert to even the slightest little thing that comes up.

And take an interest in those slight little things. Don't see them as too small to pay attention to. For example, with anger—the normal ways that people deal with anger are either to express the anger, which creates bad kamma, or to bottle it up. Of course, what happens to bottled anger? It ferments and then it explodes the bottle. And even before it explodes the bottle, people can sense that there's a radioactive bottle in you, which if you're afraid to look at the anger, you're going to deny. So you have to be in a position where you can look at the anger without any fear.

This is why it's important to have this third alternative, which is first to breathe through any tension that's built up in the body around the anger, because that's the part that makes the anger unbearable—that physical, visceral sense of tension, tightness, blockage in the body that feels wrong. That's what makes the anger unbearable. Thoughts on their own are bearable.

So you've first got to deal with that sense of physical pressure in the body. And you do that by learning how to breathe through the pressure—first to create a sense of ease in one part of the body, the main focus of your meditation. Then you allow that ease to spread. As soon as you sense any quivering of negative energy anywhere in the body, think of the positive energy going through and smoothing it out, smoothing it out, the way you'd comb out a tangle in your hair. Then when you get a sense that you can deal with the physical side of the anger and not be overwhelmed by it, that puts you in a position where you can look and be more honest with yourself about the mental side: what the issues are that make you angry.

The thought comes into the mind. You can see it. You can question it. Why? Why are you angry about this? Why do you hold this anger? It'll give a reason—sometimes flippant, sometimes more sincere. But you have to be aware that often the reason it gives the first time around is not the real reason. So you've got to ask again and again. This is why this is detailed work. You have to keep coming back to the same thing again and again.

You know you've got the right answer when you see that the reason is really foolish and you can drop the whole issue. Then you know you've made a real break with whatever the issue was before. But this kind of work requires that you be patient with every thought that comes up. Look at it in detail; don't get sucked into it. Look at it as a process. You need to do this with a sense of being firmly grounded with the breath, firmly grounded in the present moment, with a sense of the whole body as your range of awareness. Then, as the thoughts come into the range of awareness, they don't destroy your concentration. They don't destroy the framework. It's like a person walking into a building. The simple fact that the person has walked into the building doesn't destroy the building.

Then you can examine the person. Ask questions. "Why are you here? What are you doing here? What are you holding in your hands? What have you got behind your back?" When you make a thorough examination, then you can see who's coming in innocently and who's not. And whether they're innocent or not, you realize that they're not in a position to overpower you anymore.

You've got the tools. You've got the strength. You've got the foundation where you can overpower them. But this requires a willingness to be very patient,

like a spider on a web. The spider is at one spot on the web. As soon as there's a little quivering anywhere on the web, it goes to check it out to see what's up. If it's another insect or whatever, it deals with it and then it goes back to its spot. It can do this day after day after day, because, after all, the insects that hit the net are its food.

So you have to be willing to look at the little things that come up that would tend to wear away your determination to stick with the practice. Deal with them one at a time, one at a time, again and again and again. It's the detailed work that allows you to see the large structure, in the same way that a geologist's work enables you to understand the mountains in a way that simply going through the mountains once or twice is not going to accomplish.

So it requires that you be obsessed with this.

You know the story of the native Americans with the geologist up in Jackson Hole back in the 19th century. There was one white man they noticed who was not like the other ones. He didn't have a gun, but he did have a suitcase, and he was going around places where white men never usually went. So they captured him one time and opened up the suitcase to see what secret weapons he might have. And it was then they realized that he was a fool. He was carrying around a suitcase full of rocks. So they let him go. They gave him the free pass that fools usually get.

Of course, what they didn't understand was that the man was trying to figure out the geology of Jackson Hole with his samples. It was those little tiny samples—along with the samples collected by a lot of other people over the years—that enabled geologists eventually to figure out what had happened in that geologically very strange area.

Your mind is geologically very strange, too. It's going to require a lot of little samples, a lot of detailed work. So do what you can to take an interest in the details. Find them fascinating.

You can make another comparison. It's like learning a language. You can learn the general rules of the grammar and a few basic phrases to get you through, but it's when you start taking an interest in the little tiny words, little tiny expressions, strange idioms, whatever, and you have an inexhaustible interest in that: That's when you really get to know the language well.

So here you are, trying to learn the language of your mind. Learn how to do both the broad grammatical work and then the detailed work of vocabulary and idiom. It's only then that you can say that you've mastered it.