

Rewriting the Mind's Song

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What we would call this stream of consciousness—all the words and sentences, the bits and snatches of songs or whatever that go through the mind—Ajaan Mun called the mind's song. The mind is singing to itself all the time. In technical terms, this is verbal fabrication. It's one of the things that you notice as you try to get the mind to settle down with the breath. All these other things come in beside the breath. They're background music—and sometimes they drown out the breath.

One of the reasons we have the chants at the beginning of the meditation—and that the chants are repeated day after day after day—is to put some new material into that mind's song, some better tunes, some better lyrics. Otherwise, the mind just goes on in its old cacophonous ways, with lots of dissonance and weird modulations. So at the very least, you want to put something new in, and make the new part the new normal.

Like thoughts of goodwill for all beings: Think them every day, every day, day after day, until that becomes the new normal for your mind. Because those attitudes of unlimited goodwill, compassion, empathetic joy, and equanimity are Brahma attitudes—the attitudes of a being on a very high level. And you would like to bring your mind up to that level. Otherwise, you're on the human level, which has lots of ups and downs—goodwill and then ill will, then goodwill and then ill will. Usually, we're very particular about who we feel goodwill for and who we feel ill will for. The Buddha is training us to try to erase that line so that there is no ill will. Or the ill will is seen as something abnormal, and you replace it something better and new. This may sound artificial, but all our thinking is artificial. It's all fabrication. So why not fabricate something good?

Now, as you work with goodwill, you find that you can't just spread cotton candy over everything and think that that takes care of the job. You have to get specific. This particular person in front of you who is being really obstreperous or this particular person who is doing a lot of harm in the world: You have to have

goodwill for those individual people, too. That's when you have to think about what goodwill means.

It means, "May they create the causes of true happiness in their lives," which means that if they're doing unskillful things, they have to realize, "This is unskillful. I've got to change." And you'd be happy to help them if you can. That should be an attitude you can have for everybody. Because after all, we'd like to see all the unskillful people in the world stop being unskillful and learn to work in ways that are conducive to generosity and virtue and general well-being all around. So you have to consciously learn to think these thoughts.

Goodwill doesn't mean that you're giving your approval to what people are doing or that you have to love them. It simply means that you don't want to seek revenge. You don't want to see them suffer for their past bad actions.

Now, for some people that's hard. Some people have done so much ill in the world that you'd like to see them suffer a little bit, squirm a little bit, before they find true happiness. But you have to ask yourself, "This attitude of mine: What kind of food is that for the mind?" Because we do feed on this—the mind's song that we have, all the bits and snatches of things. Some of them just go right past. With others we grab a little fragment and we feed on it. And if you find yourself feeding on an ill will fragment, you have to ask yourself what you're getting out of it.

As the Buddha said, if you want to get past something, you have to see it come, you have to see it go, so that you can get a sense of why it's coming. But then you also have to look for the allure. Why is it that when something comes, you don't just let it go? You grab on to it. It's the part of the mind's song that's like a little tune that you hum over and over and over again. What is there about that fragment that you find so appealing? What's the flavor you get out of it?

And be careful here, because the mind will often lie to itself, especially with something like ill will. When we stop to think about it, we don't like the idea that we're genuinely hoping for people to suffer. So the mind will come up with excuses for why. But they may not be the real reason. You know they're not the real reason when you compare the allure with the drawbacks, and see that the drawbacks are so much greater. So you let go of it for a little bit but then the mind goes back. That means it's getting a hit of something that it's not admitting to

itself. So you have to watch it again and again and again. This means, on the one hand, that you're willing to admit to yourself that, yes, you do have these unskillful thoughts in the mind. And two, you have some unskillful reasons for liking them.

That's one of the reasons why we practice concentration in general: to get away from those ways of feeding, so that when you get back to them, you notice, "Oh. I've returned to that." And it's usually in the moment of returning that there will be a little bit of something to indicate why you want to go for it. Once you've really found the allure, and you can see very clearly that it's not worth it, then you don't have to tell yourself to let go. You let go automatically.

Ajaan Lee's image is of a fruit that's thoroughly ripened. You don't have to pick it. It falls from the tree on its own. In fact, all the ajaans talk about this. When the time comes to let go, you don't have to tell the mind to let go. It sees something so thoroughly, understands it so thoroughly, that it develops the dispassion which is the escape. The mind just lets go on its own.

So, as long as you don't see that letting go on its own, it means that there's still more work to be done. As I said, one of the ways of doing this well is to make goodwill and all these other skillful attitudes the new normal in your mind, so that you can see thoughts of ill will as something abnormal.

If you hang around people who are dealing in ill will and all kinds of other unskillful attitudes all the time, those attitudes begin to seem normal and the mind can just fit in with them very easily. It doesn't question anything. You think this is just the way human beings are. But then you have to realize that the ordinary way that people live is not the way to find happiness. You want something better.

That means you have to tune your mind into a new radio station—the radio station of the Brahma, the radio station of the noble ones. Get onto their frequency. Now, in their frequency, the normalcy is goodwill for all, compassion for all, empathetic joy for all, equanimity for all when it's necessary. That's the song in their minds.

So learn a new song. Learn new melodies, the melodies that raise the level of the mind. This is one of the ways in which we train the mind. There are other aspects to the training besides just new ways of thinking. But the fact that we do

have these new ways of thinking and they're part of our repertoire now helps us to get a better perspective on our old ways of thinking and to let them go when we see that they're not really worth it. And that's an important part of discernment right there.