

The Goldsmith

January 14, 2019

Ajaan Lee once said that training the mind is like training a child. When it cries, you have to learn how to decipher its cries. Sometimes it's crying because it's hungry. Sometimes it's crying because it's got a stomachache. And sometimes it's crying simply because it's ornery. It has its moods. And you have to learn how to deal with it in its different moods, or as Ajaan Fuang would say, in its different rhythms. There are times when all you have to do is feed it and it's happy. Other times when you have to pick it up, move it around, give it something to play with. Other times you have to just let it cry until it's done.

The Buddha has an image of a goldsmith. He said the goldsmith has to do three things. He has to put the gold in the fire. But then he has to take it out. When he takes it out, he can either just look at it or else blow on it to blow away the impurities. In the same way, when you're training the mind, there are three activities or three qualities you develop at different times—or it might be better just to say that you emphasize them at different times. There's effort, concentration, and equanimity.

Effort is when you keep at the mind. It's not obeying you, but you keep at it, keep trying, trying, trying to get it to settle down. That's like putting the gold in the fire. You have to heat the mind a bit. You can't just let it wander as it likes. You have to bring it to one object and try to make it stay there.

Now, the effort doesn't have to be simply brute force. You can control the mind by making the breath as comfortable as you can and think of the breath suffusing throughout the body. But at the same time, you have to be strict with it. If it's going to wander off, you bring it right back. Try to bring it back as quickly as you can, because otherwise it gets used to wandering. The hour of meditation becomes fifty-five minutes of wandering and then five minutes of concentration. You want to make it a full hour of training the mind with as little wandering as possible. That's when you're emphasizing the effort.

Concentration is once the mind has settled down, you do your best to keep it there. This is like blowing off the impurities. In other words, little things will come and disturb the mind once it's still, but all you have to do is zap them. In other words, you breathe right through wherever in the body you feel there's tension related to the thought. And you keep at it. But the effort here is much milder than the effort of trying to get the mind to settle down.

Then finally there's watching. This can apply to two different things. One is when the mind really settles down and nothing is bothering it at all, you just watch it. You see what little subtle things may come up. The other time when you have to watch it, though, is when it's totally out of control. You want it to settle down; it refuses. So you watch it. What this means is that you don't get involved with it. At least part of the mind stays apart from whatever else the mind is doing. It says, "I want to understand this, what's going on here, what's disturbing the mind." And the mind may not show you its reasons very readily, very quickly. So you have to watch it for quite a while and you have to be very patient but very consistent in watching. It'll run all over the place. But you stay where you are, watching it. Try to develop this quality of being the observer and tell yourself that the mind is simply putting on a show. It's a pretty bad show—sometimes it's a show of greed, a show of lust, a show of anger, a show of just wanting to wander around. Okay, watch the show. Whether it's a good show or a bad show, you watch it.

And at some point, it'll reveal itself: This is why it's upset or this is why it's worked up. And then you can do something about it. That's when you put it back in the fire or you blow off the impurities, or whatever is appropriate, because you've learned something new about the mind.

The mind has lots of different problems. It's a very complex thing, the mind. As Ajaan Lee once said, the mind is so complex that all the ways of the mind could never be put in any book. We have 45 volumes of the Canon and still they don't cover everything the mind can do. In the Buddha's image, as he said, the mind is even more variegated than the animal kingdom. Think of all the different kinds of animals there are: animals in the sea, animals in the sky, animals on land—all that have been or may be. But the mind has even more variety than that.

But fortunately, it's not totally infinite in its crazy variety. The big problems come down to greed, aversion, and delusion. And as you get to know the mind, you begin to recognize when which of these is operating. But in the beginning, it's going to have a lot of details and a lot of other idiosyncratic ways of doing things, going out of bounds, coming back. This doesn't happen only when you're just beginning the practice. There are times, any time in the practice, when things just don't fit in with what you've learned before. That means there's something new in the mind coming up that you haven't mastered yet. So now's your chance to get to know it. This is when you watch. Again, watch not simply saying, "Well, I'm going to be okay and accept whatever comes up." Say, "I'm going to watch like a spy. I want to understand whatever comes up and find out what's causing it so that I can

do something about it.” And be open to the fact that you’re going to learn something new.

This is why you approach the training of the mind as a skill, but as a skill that hasn’t been totally set in stone. After all, the Buddha taught and transmitted basically the main principles. But your mind is not composed simply of main principles. It has all its details. And so you have to learn how to adjust the main principles to fit in with the details of your mind. That requires some ingenuity on your part, some patience, and lots of observation.

This is why the Buddha told Rahula, his son, the first time he gave him meditation instructions, “Make your mind like earth. Whatever gets thrown on the earth, the earth isn’t upset, isn’t excited.” Now this doesn’t mean that you make your mind insensitive. What it actually means is that you make your mind solid so that you’re not blown away by things. Whatever good comes up, whatever bad comes up, you want to simply watch it. Where is it coming from? Where is it going? The more solid you can make your observer, the more you’ll be able to see. The more patient you make the observer, the more you’ll see. But again, this is not the sort of patience that simply says, “Oh, I’ll put up with anything and that’s all I need to do.” You put up with things so that you can understand them. Then, when you can understand them, you can exert some control. In that way, you learn new areas of control that you didn’t have before.

Ajaan Fuang would say that when people came to study with him, they’d sometimes come with problems he had never encountered in his many years of meditation. But he had Ajaan Lee’s “Method Two.” And “Method Two” has those seven steps. As he said, “All the problems of meditation can be related to a misuse of one of those steps.” So it’s always good to keep them in mind. It gives you a framework for asking questions: Is it because you’re not focused on the breath or because the breath isn’t spreading well or you’re not letting the different breath energies mingle well, or you’re at the wrong focal point in the body? There are lots of ways that you can take those basic principles and ask questions around them to get some handle on what might be wrong with the mind when you don’t understand it.

So, on the days when the mind doesn’t do what you want it to do, it’s a time to learn, a time to watch. You look at the gold. And then you figure out when you need to put it back in the fire, when you blow on it: in other words, when you use your equanimity, when you use your concentration, when you use your effort, because if you use just effort all the time, as the Buddha said, it’s like putting gold in the fire and leaving it there: The gold just gets burned. If you just blow on it, it doesn’t get purified, because it first has to be burned before blowing on it will do

any good. If you simply watch it, nothing happens at all. It's the same with the mind. If it's nothing but effort, effort, effort, it's going to burn out. If it's nothing but watching, there's no progress at all. Nothing but concentration, there's no progress. So learn to read the rhythms of the mind so that you can give yourself an all-around training—one that does get the mind quiet, but makes progress at the same time.