

The Craft of the Heart

May 21, 2019

As we meditate, we're working on a craft, what Ajaan Lee called the craft of the heart: *citta-vijja*. And as with any craft, you have to develop lots of mental faculties. You're here trying to get the mind to settle down, to be in the present moment in a way where you can see what's going on inside. It involves doing and it involves observing. The doing is creating a state of concentration; the observing is watching yourself as you do it, both to make sure that your mind does settle down as you want it to and to see what other things you learn about the mind in the course of getting it to settle down. So you've got to develop these two faculties together, to make them wise and discerning. If you just observe, nothing happens. If you just do, do, do, do, do without really stepping back to observe what you're doing and the results of what you're doing, you can get yourself in strange situations, strange mental states. So for safety's sake, and for the sake of the craft, be both a doer and a watcher.

You're engaging in *sankhara*, fabrication, which is the doing, and it has a purpose. That purpose involves imagination. This is an aspect of meditation that's often overlooked; people sometimes regard it with suspicion. After all, we're supposed to be simply watching what's really happening, right? And imagination seems to get in the way of that. But you can't engage in a process with a goal without being able to imagine the goal and imagine the steps for getting there, what's possible and what's not.

When I was in France recently, several people raised this issue. They felt uncomfortable imagining the breath energy in the body, for instance. They said, "Aren't we supposed to be dealing with what's already there?" And my response was, "Well, what's already there *is* breath energy, if you learn to see it that way. You could see your sensation of the body in the other ways, but seeing it as breath is really helpful," which comes under that aspect of this being a craft.

What way of experiencing your body will actually be useful in getting the mind to settle down? One way is to see it in terms of the four elements, or the four properties: earth, water, wind, and fire, which sound kind of quaint or archaic, crude precursors to science. But they describe very accurately how you sense the body from within: There's solidity, liquidity, energy, and warmth.

Energy is a movement—that's the breath. And so we can imagine the breath doing different things in the body, the breath energies going down the spine, going down the legs, going down the arms. The imagining is to help you see it in

that way and then you can do something with it. Without the imagination, the body seems just to be a lump. There's nothing much you can do with a lump.

It's like a time, years back, when I had a tight spot in my back and I was assuming that I was experiencing a bone in the spine. Then an osteopath worked on it and pointed out that it was actually a very tight muscle. Now, you can't relax a bone, but you can relax a muscle. In this particular case, it required a lot of concentration to get it to relax because it'd been tight for so long. But imagining it as a muscle, I was able to work through the tension.

It's like teaching a child that the world is round. The child can't see the world, so the child has to imagine the world as round. Now, the world really is round, and in asking the child to imagine that it's round we're not asking the child to imagine something that's not there. But it's going to be a while before the child can actually use that information and test it. But imagining that the world is round helps in a lot of ways. Think about flying from Los Angeles to Bangkok. You can actually shorten the flight time by flying past Alaska. Now, if the world were flat, that wouldn't make any sense. But because it's round, it does. In the same way, when you're working with the breath, think of the sensations of the body as being breath. You can do things with them.

If there's a sense of ease in the body, especially if it's associated with the way you breathe, you can think of the breath carrying that sense of ease and pleasure to the different parts of the body. You can relax various tensions. You can relax, say, the tension around a pain, you can relax the different tensions in the back that keep your posture from being straight. You can do something the Buddha recommends, which is that when there's a sense of ease or refreshment, you can let it spread through the body. And the breath is the medium through which it can spread.

Or after you've been working with the breath energies and it's time to settle down, imagine yourself being surrounded by breath and that you can stay with the sensation of breathing without there having to have any gaps or pauses.

Sometimes our mindfulness is like the phrases in music. There's a phrase that lasts for a while and then stops. And then there's another phrase which goes on and then stops. Can you imagine your mindfulness not stopping, as not occurring in phrases, but just drilling right through time? Holding that image in mind can help strengthen your concentration.

So in the doing there is an element of imagining, and you want to learn how to make good use of it. It's not the kind of imagination that flies away from the present moment. It's a question of learning how to reimagine the present, reimagine what you can do with the body, reimagine what you can do with the

mind, because only when you can imagine these things can you do them. If you tell yourself it's impossible, there's no way, then it's not going to happen.

Still, your imagination does need a brake, or a governor, and the governor on it is your ability to observe in an unfazed way. This is important both in getting the mind to settle down and in dealing with insights that come up. In getting the mind to settle down, you want to be able to observe frankly and fairly: "When I think of the breath in this way, when I try to get the mind to settle down this way, what happens? Is it good? How does it compare with other ways that I've tried to get the mind to settle down?"

You can't let your enthusiasm for what you're doing get in the way at this point. It's like that conundrum that William James pointed out. He said there're some truths where your desires cannot get in the way if you want to learn those truths. If you're going to observe something over which you have no control, you can't let your desires for it to be one way or the other to get in the way. Or when you do have some control, you can't let your desire that "I want to do whatever I want and I want the results to be good" take over, because that doesn't work either. Truths of this sort are truths of the observer.

There are also the truths of the will, which will come about only as a result of your wanting them to. For the mind to settle down, for instance, you have to *want* it to settle down. It's not going to settle down on its own. So in the case of the doer, your desire has to be there. In the case of the observer, desire has to get out of the way. This is why it's a little bit tricky to combine the observer with a doer. And this is one of the reasons why a lot of crafts are difficult to master. But whatever experience you've had with a manual skill should help you gain some sense of "now you're in the doing mode" and "now you're in the observing mode." They're two different things, because the doer has to want, and the observer has to be totally unfazed. And that ability to stay unfazed can be your safe spot.

One of the most affecting passages in Ajaan Maha Boowa's Dhamma talks is when he tells of how, when Ajaan Mun passed away, he felt totally lost. Here was the teacher he'd gone to many, many times for help. Now the teacher was gone. But as he sat and reflected on it for a while, he began to realize, "What about the things he taught me while he was alive? I can take those as my teachers now." And one of the most valuable lessons was: If anything comes up in the mind that's new and you're not sure about it, just stay with the observer. Just watch it. Don't be fazed. Don't get enthusiastic. Don't jump to a lot of conclusions. Just be there with the observer and whatever it is will pass. Watch out for the part of the mind that doesn't want it to pass.

As a meditator, you've got to maintain your safety, and the observer is what does that, to make sure you get good results—and then to make sure that when the results start getting good, you don't let them run away with you. After all, we're trying to get the mind to be really settled and solid, because, as the Buddha said, true happiness is peace. And peace has to be solid so that it's not affected or destroyed by other things. You want a peace that's reliable. So you have to make your observer reliable.

So as we're meditating, remember that we're dealing both with truths of the will and truths of the observer. We're dealing both as active participants in getting the mind to settle down and in trying to understand things, and as the more passive observing side. Of course, the observer is not totally passive. It has to be clear-eyed and sharp and asking the right questions. "Is this something you really can rely on? When you have this insight, what does the mind do next?" Watch out for what the mind's going to do next because sometimes the desire to be a person who has had an insight takes over the insight. This is what they call a neurotic breakthrough, which is a bad term. It's not that the breakthrough is neurotic. It breaks through a neurosis. Things open up and there's a great sense of relief. But the mind tends to jump to a lot of conclusions as it replaces a new world to replace the old, neurotic world that's been broken through.

So watch out for the ways of the mind. Learn how to use your imagination in a positive way. Learn how to use your observer in a positive way. That way, you'll be able to master the craft of the heart and come out with the results you want—or better, with results that are worth wanting. And your sense of what's really worth wanting should develop as your mastery grows.