

How to Really Depend on Yourself

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One of the distinctive features of the forest tradition is that there's no single forest meditation method. Read the teachings of the different ajaans, and you find that they have many different approaches. Some focus on the breath, some focus on Buddho, some on the contemplation the body. But there are some features that they all have in common.

You have to remember that each of the monks was out in the forest alone, often for months at a time. When he came up with a problem, he had to figure a way around it. It was a long way to go see the teacher. And as Ajaan Mun and all the ajaans say, the teacher can't be there holding your hand all the time. You have to learn how to depend on yourself.

So how do you depend on yourself? There were a couple of principles Ajaan Fuang often used in his teaching. He made a distinction between the basic principles and the details. The basic principles are the things you have to keep in mind so that you don't go astray. But then the details are going to depend on each individual. I noticed that as he was teaching people, in the beginning it was like herding cats. With one person he'd have to direct them in one direction, another person in another direction. It was as if the spot of "just right" was in the middle, and some people were too far to the right, others were too far to the left, too far forward, too far back. He had to bring them into that spot of just right. But then when everyone reached the spot where the breath stops and awareness fills the body, from that point on everybody's practice seemed to follow the same steps.

We're working on how to get people to go from too far left or too far right into the middle. He said if you look at the seven steps that Ajaan Lee taught in *Keeping the Breath in Mind*—these are at the end of the book *Awareness Itself*—whatever the problem is, it's usually because one of those steps is missing: focusing on the breath, starting out with long, deep in-and-out breaths; working with the word Buddho; dropping the Buddho to analyze the breath; working the breath throughout the body. Find a spot in the body to be centered. Then combine all the different breath energies in the body so that they're unified. These are the basic principles.

As for the details, there were related to two words Ajaan Fuang used in his meditation instructions more than any others. One was to be observant. In other words, you try something out and then you look for the results. And being observant means you have to be observant all around. The results may seem good

in one way, but you have to watch out for areas in which they may not be so good. Then you adjust things accordingly.

This is a basic principle of cause and effect. This was how Ajaan Mun stayed sane out in the forest. He tended to have many visions. Devas would come to him and teach him that he should do walking meditation like this or sitting meditation like that. As he told Ajaan Fuang, if you believe everything you see in your visions, you're going to go crazy. So his way of filtering things out was to take whatever Dhamma lesson there might be in the vision and check it against what he knew of the Dhamma already. If it passed that first test, then he'd put it into practice and see what actually happened. He'd withhold judgment until he'd seen the results. That's being observant.

Other times, however, you run into problems. You don't have any visions; you don't have any guidance. That's when he said you have to use your ingenuity. Ajaan Fuang talked about how when he was first meditating, Ajaan Lee would talk about how to bring the mind down. So Ajaan Fuang brought it down, down, down, down, until it seemed like it had no energy at all. He said to himself, "This must not be right," so then he brought it up, up, up, up, up. That was too far. So, how about the middle? He brought it right into the middle to the point of just right. That's where he could settle in. The mind was clear, energetic. Right for gaining insights.

So when you meet with a problem and you can't find any instructions as to how to deal with it, use your own ingenuity. The fact that you've thought a solution up on your own doesn't mean it's not Dhamma. Not all Dhamma has to be in the texts. If something works, gives good results, gives rise to more insight, gives rise to an ability to let go of things that are burdening the mind, then it counts as Dhamma.

Or if you're not really sure of the results, this is where it's good to think of a principle that Ajaan Maha Boowa talked about one time. There's a Dhamma talk where he talks about his reaction to Ajaan Mun's death. He had depended so many times on the Ajaan Mun, even when Ajaan Mun would not always answer his questions. But at crucial times when the issues were large, Ajaan Mun would give him guidance that he could depend on. Now, however, Ajaan Mun was gone. What should he do? He felt, he said, like a person whose doctor has died, the doctor he's depended on for so many years to look after his illnesses. Now the doctor's gone. He'd have to be a wild animal, he said, out in the forest, with no one to care for his illnesses.

Then he stopped to think: What were the instructions he would get from Ajaan Mun when he had a big problem? One of the most important ones was: If

something comes up in the mind and you're not sure about how trustworthy it may be, just stay with your sense of awareness. Watch it pass while the awareness stays. And that way it would cause no danger.

As you can see, there's no one way of solving all the problems of the mind. You get the basic principles, but then you have to figure out how the principles work for you. There are times in the Buddha's teachings where, when he teaches breath meditation, he starts out just with breath meditation. Other times before he teaches breath meditation, he teaches lots of other themes to contemplate. Because some people find it hard to just settle down with the breath immediately.

So you can contemplate making the mind like earth, trying to be as non-reactive as you can to whatever comes up—not to stay just there with non-reactivity, but to use that sense of solidity as a basis for looking at the breath, adjusting the breath, figure out what's working, what's not. If issues of the day are filling your mind when you sit down to meditate, you might try the brahmaviharas. Remind yourself that you don't want to have any bad kamma with anybody, that you at least wish them goodwill. Then develop some equanimity around the issues of the day so that you can settle down with the breath. Or you can contemplate the inconstancy of the distractions that would pull you away from the breath. You can contemplate the fact that they're not under your control, they're not really yours. You don't have to identify with them.

Sometimes it's useful to think things through a bit to the point where you're ready to settle down and you can comfortably be with the breath. There are lots of different ways of getting the mind into that spot of just right.

So you have to be observant, and you have to be strategic. You're going for good results. You're coming from ignorance, so how do you move from ignorance to good results? You experiment. Try things out. If one of the Dhamma teachings doesn't work for you, you might try another one. Or you might ask yourself, "Do I really understand these teachings? What if I turn that understanding around? Looked at it from a different angle? Used it as a different kind of tool?" It was through thinking strategically these ways that the forest ajaans gained awakening. And what works for them should work for us.

It's not so much a particular method but a strategic approach that we're here to explore. We want to learn about our minds. In some ways, our minds are all alike; in other ways they're personal, individual. So it's going to take some exploration to figure out: Where is your mind like Ajaan Lee's mind? Where is it somewhat different? Or is it like Ajaan Maha Boowa's mind? Ajaan Mun's mind? Where is it different?

It's in thinking strategically in this way—being observant, using your ingenuity—that you can learn how to depend on yourself. You won't always have to be waiting for an ajaan to come and answer your questions. You'll be able learn for yourself: What's a good question? What's a question that can be put aside? Learn how to judge when you've found a good answer.

You have to remember that insight is a value judgment. We're not here simply to accept what the Buddha has to say about the world. We're here to see what's worth doing, what's not worth doing. What when you do it will lead to long term harm and suffering? And what when you do it will lead to long term well-being and happiness? Notice that those questions are strategic. You ask them to get some guidance from others, but you also ask them of yourself: to give yourself guidance in how to approach your meditation. To remind yourself of what you're looking for. And where to look for it. In other words, you look for it in your actions. And you judge those actions by the results.