

Adjust the Flame

September 16, 2020

The mind's like a fire, with flames shooting out, thoughts shooting out, in all directions. When we meditate, we're trying to adjust the flame so that it's steady, focused on one thing: the breath here in the present moment.

Try to stay with it consistently. Start with a small flame. Find one spot in the body that's sensitive to the breath, one that feels really good when the breath is just right, and not so good when it's not right. Take that as your guide.

Often this is in the area around the heart, but different people will find it in different spots. So, find your spot. Watch it all the way through the in-breath, all the way through the out-. Try to get sensitive to the signs that it gives, that now's the time to change from in-breath to out-breath, from out-breath to in-breath. If you adjust it just right, there's a sense of smoothness to the breath, to the changes in the breath. That smoothness is what you then want to spread to different parts of the body.

That's when Ajaan Lee gives another image. He says it's like a Coleman lantern. You may have seen them. They have little bags made out of white thread. The kerosene comes out very subtlety and bathes in all the threads of the bags, so that when you light it, the whole bag is lit up, and the light is dazzling.

Now, you may not get a sense of light in your breath, but try to have a sense that there are breath channels going throughout the body, and the breath is licking around those channels, flowing through those channels, carrying that sense of smoothness in the breath to the different parts of the body. This way, you take this tendency of the mind to burn and you do something good with it.

You may remember that in the Pali Canon, when they saw a fire burning, they saw an image of clinging. Fire clings. It clings to its fuel. If you've got a stick with a flame burning on one end, if you try to shake the flame off it won't let go. It hangs on. The fire clings—and because it's clinging, it's trapped in that fuel.

So you're taking this tendency of the mind to cling and to burn, and you're putting it to good use. Cling to one thing. Cling to the breath. And don't be afraid of being attached to the breath.

I remember reading a piece by a monk, of all people, saying that you shouldn't do concentration practice, because concentration practice is focused on one object, and it's an attachment to that one object. Instead, you should let the mind wander around from object to object, and just note where it's going.

But that wandering around is clinging, too: serial clinging. It's not the case that holding on to one thing consistently is the only way you can cling. You can go from one thing to the next, to the next, clinging each time. It's like trying to cross a stream, going from one rock to another rock. If your mind is aimless, it's not going to get to the other side. It can step to this rock, then back to another one, then it goes who knows where.

If you were to draw a map of the movements of an ordinary mind throughout the day, it would be a huge mess, tangled lines all over the place. What the Buddha's teaching here is a series of steps: stepping stones that will take you across the river, get you to the safety of the other shore.

As you go from one state of concentration to a deeper state, to a deeper state, you get closer and closer. So of course, you're going to hang on, but you're hanging on to something that's useful, something that will take you in the right direction.

And why is that? Because when you hang on to one object like this, you get to see not only the object but also the mind in relationship to the object. You see how the mind state creates a state of becoming around the object, a sense of you focused on that object, and the world in which you and the object exist.

As you do this, you begin to realize that these levels of becoming are not a given. You actually create them. Getting the mind into concentration helps you see the process of creation, see the raw materials from which you create these becomings. And it teaches you how to nip the process in the bud.

That's one of the reasons why, when the Buddha gives instructions on mindfulness practice, he says to put aside greed and distress with reference to the world. Because wherever there's a world, there's a state of becoming.

At first, you're putting aside concern for worlds outside, and you actually want to stay in this world, the world of your body right here, right now: just your awareness, the breath, the body, the feeling of ease. Those are the things you focus on. Those are the things you emphasize. There may be pains and aches in different parts of the body, but you don't focus on them. Focus on the parts of the body that you *can* make comfortable, so that the mind gains a

sense of wanting to be here in this world, rather than traveling around to other worlds.

Because this world is one where you can see the processes as they're happening: the processes of creating one becoming, and then going to another, and then another. And you can see what drives them.

Then you can apply all those questions that the Buddha has you ask about things like this: What's the origination? In other words, what in the mind gives rise to this, what impulse? And then how does it pass away? After all, these impulses don't come in a steady stream. They come and then they stop. They come and then they stop. Again, think of a fire, a bonfire burning. The flames leap here, leap there. Then they die down and then they leap up again.

Then you can ask yourself: Why do you go for these things? What's the allure? If the mind is coming from a relatively steady state of well-being, where the breath is smooth and that smoothness goes through the body, it tends to be more honest with itself about why it goes for things like that: distractions, states of becoming that would pull you away from the breath. Then you can compare the allure with the drawbacks, until you realize that it's not worth it, going for those things. You develop some dispassion. That's the escape.

Now, dispassion is not aversion. It's simply realizing that you've outgrown something. This is how we outgrow our childish habits. There are a lot of things that when we're children have an appeal, but as you begin to grow up, you realize that the appeal is very meager, whereas the drawbacks are pretty great. Think of all the candy you ate as a child. As far as you were concerned, there was nothing wrong with anything sweet at all.

Ajaan Suwat made that comment one time. When he was a young monk, he went to stay with Ajaan Mun. One day, Ajaan Mun complained that something was too sweet. Ajaan Suwat thought to himself, "How can anything be too sweet?" But then as he got older, he realized, "Oh, it is possible for things to be too sweet."

In the same way, there are a lot of things that have an allure: lust, anger, envy, all these unskillful states in the mind. They have their allure. If they didn't have that allure, we wouldn't go for them. But as you get more mature, you begin to realize that the allure is not worth it, because they carry a lot of drawbacks in their wake.

That's what dispassion is. You're developing a maturity around these things. And you're trying to make that maturity habitual. Think of meditation as a preparation for death. You don't want to be foolish when the mind is desperate, when it can't stay in the body any longer, and it just goes for whatever. If the mind isn't trained, it sees something sweet or something

flashy and it goes for it without thinking about what the drawbacks might be.

So you want to learn how to focus on the drawbacks as a habit, remembering that if you go for x , it'll carry y and z in its wake. When you think about all the drawbacks of y and z , no matter how alluring x may be, you realize it's not worth it. Keep that line of thought active, that way of thinking active, because it'll save you from a lot of grief.

So when you adjust this flame of the mind, make it steady. That way, you can read your mind. It's like fires outside. If you try to read by a bonfire, it's hard because the flames are flickering so much. But if you adjust the flame—as when you have an oil lamp and it burns with a steady flame, or a Coleman lantern with a steady bright flame: You can read easily. The same with the mind: When you adjust the flame of the mind so that it's that steady flame of jhana, you can read your mind very well.

You can see how it puts states of becoming together. You can begin to anticipate different states of becoming that you've created in the past and that you might want to go for in the future. As soon as there's an inkling that the mind might head in that direction, you can already see where it's going, the whole story. You want to see the whole story as quickly as you can.

I'm reminded about the story of Beethoven. He said that the idea for the Sixth Symphony came to his mind in a few seconds, the whole thing. As soon as the initial phrase came up, he knew where the whole thing was going.

You want to be that quick in seeing where different states of becoming, or different inklings of the mind that might want to go for a state of becoming, will lead. That way, you can protect yourself from a lot of dangers, a lot of disappointments, a lot of wasted energy.

So there are advantages to holding on to one thing, clinging to one object and not just flitting around. When you flit around, you don't learn much. But if you're methodical in where you focus your attachments, you can focus them on states of becoming that'll be useful, that'll act as one of the stepping stones across the river.

So don't be afraid of being attached to your object, because when you stay with one object like this, the mind does become steady. Even though there's still some fire burning in the mind, it's a steady flame. It's under control. And it gives you a clear picture of everything going on inside and all around.