

Tending the Flame

December 23, 2020

Last night I talked about Ajaan Fuang's three stages in the meditation practice: doing it, maintaining it, putting it to use. I compared them to three stages in dealing with fire: first, making the fire, then maintaining it, and then putting it to use.

Tonight I'd like to talk a little more about the "maintaining." There are basically two contexts in which you maintain your mind, maintain your concentration.

The first is while you're sitting here. Once you've finally got the mind to settle down, you've talked to yourself about the breath, and about the mind's relationship to the breath, and figured out how to get them snugly together: From that point on, you try to maintain it with as much ease as possible, but also as much strength as you can manage, so that you can get the mind to settle down even more deeply.

For instance, once you've talked about the breath and gotten it to about as good as you can get it, and you've spread it around, you realize you don't need to use the directed thought and evaluation anymore to protect it.

In the beginning, because the mind is already engaged in directed thought and evaluation all the time, you have to convert that thinking to the purpose of the meditation. Some people, when they read that the first jhana has directed thought and evaluation as two of its factors, will ask, "Well, how do I do that?" And the answer, of course, is, "You're already doing it all the time." You choose topics to talk about and then you make comments on them. The mind's doing this most of the day—in fact, all day, it seems.

So to protect your meditation from the mind's normal chatter, you have to make it chatter in a new way. But once you've got yourself focused on the breath and you've settled down, you begin to realize that you've reached a point where you don't need this wall of chatter to protect it. You can put it aside and you can stay with the perception of "breath." There'll be a sense that the mind and the breath are one. Everything in the body comes together, with a sense of energy

welling up because all the blockages inside have been removed. Then you can maintain it, without all the chatter, without all the talking.

After a while, the sense of rapture becomes tedious. At first, it's energizing, but after a while it becomes too much. You want the mind to be even more still. So you tune in to a more refined level of energy. The mind settles down. You finally get to the point where the breath stops.

Then Ajaan Fuang would have you bring things into balance. Think about the other elements of the body, besides the breath. There's fire, so ask yourself, "Where in the body is the warmest spot right now?" Focus there and then think of it intensifying and then spreading from that spot, in the same way that the breath energy would spread from the spot where you were focused on it.

If things start getting too hot inside the body, then you can think of water. Cool yourself down. Find a cool sensation in the body, focus there. Let a sense of coolness spread from that spot. Then think of earth: the solidity, and the bones, the flesh. And then bring all of these elements together in a balanced way. In other words, the breath balances with the earth part of the body, and the fire and the water balance out. So everything is just right.

When things are just right, you can let go of your perception of the shape of the body. You begin to realize that the body seems to be just a mist, and the edges of the mist are ill-defined. But between the droplets of the mist, there's space. You focus there. Then try to steady that perception. You're peeling away mental activities, one by one by one, until you finally can drop the perception of space, and you're with just, "awareness." Maintain that perception. And then Ajaan Fuang would say, "Drop the oneness." It seems like nothing's happening at all. You get the mind very, very still.

When things are balanced like this, it doesn't take a lot of energy to keep the mind in concentration. Your focus is strong. It's very settled. There's a sense that your center of gravity has just gotten lower and lower, so there's very little sense that anything would tip you over. You begin to see layers of fabrication in the mind peel away.

This is how you maintain your concentration. You get more and more still, and at the same time there's less energy put in, but more energy comes out. You could say you're just getting more efficient at getting your mind to settle down.

That's how people can maintain concentration for long periods of time. And of course, while you're maintaining it this way, you begin to see things about the processes of fabrication in the mind. This is how "maintaining" shades into "using" while you're sitting here in formal meditation.

The other context is when you're out and around. Once you're able to maintain the perception of the breath as you're sitting here, try to maintain it as you get up. This is one of the reasons why we do walking meditation: so that you can get used to maintaining your center even as the body moves.

Then, from walking, you can get involved in more complex activities, but always try to maintain this sense of having a center inside. Here's where you have to deal with thoughts, but you have to learn how to step back from them a bit, so that you still have your sense of center as your grounding while the thoughts come and go.

Some of them come, and you realize that they're going to be useful. If there are chores you have to do around the monastery, or work you have to do at home, you can think thoughts that are related to those activities. But you can watch them from a sense of being grounded. When you don't have to think, you can get right back to the breath to nourish yourself.

In this way, the meditation maintains its momentum from one formal sit to the next, to the next. And again, as you're maintaining it, you're going to be seeing things going on in the mind that you missed before. Sometimes you see things you don't like about the mind. But when the mind is more settled like this, it makes a lot more sense just to admit, "Yeah, I do have these unskillful thoughts in my mind." We have this way of dressing things up inside, that whatever we think is all good, and that whatever intentions we have toward other people are all good. But you really have to question that. And if you're coming from a place of well-being inside, you *can* question it. Effectively. You can dig out a lot of the unskillful things in the mind that tend to disguise themselves.

So here again, the "maintaining" shades into "using." This fits into what the Buddha had to say about how you find the Dhamma, how you nourish the Dhamma inside. He said there are two activities. One is commitment, and the other is reflection.

By committing yourself to stay with the object of your meditation as long as

you can, you're engaged in what the Buddha calls "commitment to the heightened mind," which he says is one of *the* basic teachings of all the Buddhas. In that verse in which he explains the heart of the Buddhas' teachings, the final line is "commitment to the heightened mind." This is it. You're committed to staying here and fending off anything that would pull you away.

Then you're reflecting. That's the second thing. There's commitment, and then there's reflection. You're reflecting on what you're doing. When you're sitting here in formal meditation, you're seeing where you're engaged in too many activities around this sense of stillness and you let go of them. As I mentioned last night with Ajaan Fuang's image, when you're trying to set something in cement, as long as the cement isn't yet hard, you have to keep the form in place. But once the cement has hardened, then you can take the forms away.

So you find, as you settle down, that sometimes the mind hasn't set yet. So you have to keep talking to yourself about the breath to make sure you don't start talking about something else. But there will come a point when things begin to solidify, and you can drop everything that's unnecessary. And you go through stages like this because you're reflecting on what you're doing.

The same as when you're out and about: You reflect on the fact that you're trying to maintain your mind, and you try to notice, "What is it that pulls you away?" You'll find, nine times out of ten, that it's *not* what other people do, it's what *you're* doing. After all, when the Buddha pointed out the causes of suffering, he said they're inside. Sartre said that "Hell is other people," but no, hell is yourself.

Yet it doesn't have to be. Your self doesn't have to be hell. The things you do in the mind can switch around and they can become your genuine friends. Your admirable friends.

So remember these two principles—commitment and reflection—and use them as you're tending to this flame here: the flame of jhana, the *cool* flame of jhana. As you maintain it, you're going to learn an awful lot, both while you're sitting here and as you go through the day.