

## *Keep Your Spirits Up*

*September 7, 2021*

When you're training the mind, it's very different from training an animal or training a child. When you're training someone outside, it's very clear who's the teacher and who's the student. But when you're training the mind, it's not clear at all, because one part of the mind is training another part of the mind. You're never really sure which part is doing the training. Actually, it's a double training: You're training the teacher at the same time that you're training the student. This is why it's so complex. But we have to learn how to live with the complexity and try to simplify it as much as we can.

Try to locate in your mind right now who wants to be on the path to a reliable happiness. Put that part of the mind in charge. Then, while that part of the mind is talking to the rest of the mind, you have to talk to that first part of the mind, too. If the question is, "Who are *you*?" don't ask that just yet. Just learn how to observe.

You have many observers in the mind, just as you have many desires, around which there are many different senses of self. Just grab hold of whatever seems nearest, whatever seems wisest, and put that person in charge. One of the lessons that person is going to have to learn is that the mind's going to have lots of ups and downs.

Remember the Buddha's statement about how the mind is so quick to change that there's nothing else that can compare with it. Our only way of counteracting that tendency is to be mindful—to stitch one moment of alertness to the next, to the next, to the next—so that you can begin to see things consistently over time.

Remember that you're going to learn from your meditation not only when the meditation goes well, but also when it doesn't go well. You watch for a bit and then you try something out. You try this kind of breathing, that kind of breathing.

If breathing doesn't work, the Buddha says that if there's a fever in the body or in the mind—in other words, if it's just not willing to settle down—you can try

some other theme that you find inspiring. It could be the Buddha, the Dhamma, the Sangha; your own virtue, your own generosity; the fact that you have the qualities that would make a person a deva. Those are things you could think about, too.

Think about that inspiring theme until the mind settles down, happy to be with that theme, and then see if you can transfer that sense of calm over to the breath. In other words, don't limit your tools. Always have the right attitude: that there's no problem that cannot be overcome. You're not likely to find a problem in your mind that has never been dealt with in meditation before. So there must be a way around it.

Expanding your repertoire and keeping a calm head, a cool head, helps you deal with the ups and downs. So you don't get too excited about the ups; you don't get depressed or upset about the downs. Just remember that this is part of the nature of the mind: It changes.

Just train the trainer, the teacher inside, to be as mindful as possible. This means keeping certain things in mind, one of which is that—given that the mind is so complex and there are so many opinions in there, so many members of the committee—it's bound to happen that when some of the members get well-trained, then others come barging in, not well-trained, and they seem to destroy everything. Actually, they don't destroy everything. As long as you can hold on to the knower inside, you can come through.

Think of those instructions that Ajaan Mun gave to Ajaan Mahā Boowa. Ajaan Mahā Boowa talks about how after Ajaan Mun passed away, he sat there looking at Ajaan Mun's body, tears flowing from his eyes. Here was the teacher he had depended on for so many years—and now the teacher was gone. What was he going to do? There was nobody else, he said, who could solve his problems the way Ajaan Mun had helped to solve them.

Then he stopped to think. What were some of the things Ajaan Mun had taught? One of them was that if anything comes up during the meditation that you're not sure about, just stay with the knower, the sense of awareness, alertness inside, and let it pass.

Now, that primarily had to do with strange pieces of knowledge, but it can also

be applied to just the ups and downs of the mind. Remember that when one member of the committee is going up and down, not everybody is going up and down.

Try to find the part of the mind that just can stay still and is willing to admit that, yes, there are things going up and things going down, the mind's not doing what you want it to, but the only way you're going to get it to do what you want it to do is to watch it for a while.

You have to listen to it, or watch it, to try to figure out what's going on. This is the *only* meaning that "acceptance" has in meditation. You accept the fact that you've got to watch what it's going to display.

That's how you're going to learn from it. If you try to deny what it's showing you, you're not going to get anywhere. So sometimes when it shows states of mind that you'd rather not see, you have to remind yourself: How are you going to deal with these unless you watch them, unless you see them, and you're not blown away by them?

This is why the Buddha taught Rāhula at the very beginning of his meditation, "Make your mind tuned to earth." Find the part of the mind that you can make solid and nonreactive, so that you can see things clearly. It's the non-reactive mind that sees. It's not the goal, it's one of the tools we use—the part of the mind that can take the ups and down in stride.

So remember, it's a multiple training we're doing here. You're training the mind to train the mind; using the breath, using whatever topics—the *brahmavihāras*, the different recollections—as ways of getting a handle on the mind. If your gaze is steady, you'll be able to remember the fact that, yes, you do have these other techniques. You gain a sense of which one might be appropriate for right now and give it a try. If it doesn't work out, give another one a try, and give another one a try. An important part here is having good humor about all this, and not getting defeated by setbacks.

There's that famous story about Shackleton and his expedition. A few of the men had left everybody else on an island off of the coast of Antarctica, and they took a little tiny, tiny boat over to South Georgia to find help there.

They landed on the wrong side of the island, and they had to cross over some

mountain passes to get to human habitation. They were presented with five passes that they could see, and they didn't know which one would take them through the mountains. So they went up to the first one—but that didn't work. They went up to the second one, that didn't work—third, fourth. Finally, it was the fifth pass that got them through. If they'd let themselves get upset over the fact that the first pass, or the second pass didn't work, they wouldn't have made it to the fifth.

I know someone who criticized Shackleton because he made a fair number of mistakes on that expedition. But he was able to keep the spirits of his men up despite the mistakes, which is how they all survived.

If the men had decided to mutiny based on one or two mistakes, that would have been the end of the whole crew. Fortunately, they were able to keep their spirits up and they found the way out.

So that's what you're doing as you're meditating—keeping your spirits up. Other parts of the mind may be going down, but keep your spirits up. It's probably one of the most essential skills that the inner teacher is going to have to develop.

This is why so many of the Thai ajaans, when they give Dhamma talks, are basically giving pep talks. They want you to be constantly up for whatever is happening in the mind—good, bad, indifferent—and not to get blown away.

Take every meditation as an opportunity to learn. Sometimes you learn things that don't work, but knowing that they don't work is a valuable lesson, and it clears the way so that you can figure out what *does* work.

If you have the right attitude, the right approach, it's all to the good.