

Stillness & Clear Seeing

November 14, 2021

Each time you start to meditate, you should remind yourself that this is a very high level of work for the mind—an honorable level of work, a noble level of work. So put yourself in the mood to do something noble. You're not going to just sit here and follow your thoughts wherever they go. You're going to stand above them, lift the mind up to a higher level where it can look at its thoughts and decide which ones are skillful, which ones are not, which ones should be encouraged, and which ones should be discouraged.

Remember, we're working on the noble truths here. What's noble about them is that they lift the mind to a higher level. When we look at suffering, we don't blame other people for it, we don't blame things outside. We take responsibility for it. That's a noble act right there. When we look at the causes of suffering, we see that the things that we crave, the things that we desire the most, are often the things that cause the most suffering. So we're willing to call our cravings into question. That's noble, too.

But to do that, you first have to get the mind still, to give it strength.

That's why we practice concentration, focusing on the breath. Take some good, long, deep in-and-out breaths. And if long breathing feels good, keep it up. If it doesn't feel good, you can change. Find a level of breathing—fast, slow, heavy, light, deep, shallow—that's just right.

The breath is the most responsive of all the elements in the body. It's the one that colors our experience of the body as a whole, and it will color our experience of things outside, too. So you want to get the breath so that it's just right. Think of that sense of just right then spreading throughout the whole body and then try to protect it. In the protecting, you'll notice that other thoughts come into the mind. If you can just let them go, fine. You don't have to pay them any mind. Think of them as stray animals wandering around outside your house. The problem is, sometimes some stray animals will come and if they get some food from you, they'll want to get shelter from you. You start feeling sorry for them. You feed them some more, and then they move in.

In other words, sometimes the distractions take over. There's something about them that pulls you in, so this is where you have to use the Buddha's five steps for dealing with thoughts like that. The first step is to notice: When do they arise? And when they arise, what causes them to arise? You're not just looking for

arising, you're looking for origination, which means: What is it in the mind that causes you to want to go out and take up that thought?

The next step is to watch for the thought to dissolve, because these thoughts, if you don't feed them, will go away like stray dogs, stray cats: If you don't feed them, they'll go away. Look to see why you want to feed those thoughts. This is called looking for the allure.

That's the third step. What is it about these thoughts that you really like? Why do you like thinking about them? What is it that you find attractive?—either in the thought itself, or just in the fact that you're thinking this thought. Sometimes that has an attraction. You think you're clever because you're thinking the thought.

But you ask yourself, is it really clever? The fourth step is to look at the drawbacks of the thought. If you keep on thinking this thought for a while, where will it lead you? When you see that it would lead you to someplace not good, then it's a lot easier to let it go. That's the fifth step: escape through dispassion.

You have to remember that the Buddha said that he got on the correct path when he was able to divide his thoughts into two types—skillful and unskillful—based on where they came from and where they led. The unskillful ones would come from mind states like sensuality, ill will, and harmfulness, and they would lead to suffering.

So instead of looking at the thought in terms of its content or whether you like it or not, the Buddha is recommending you look at it in terms of where it's coming from, where it's going to go, what it will cause you to do. If you see that it'll cause you to do something unskillful, you've got to let it go. In his image, it's like a cowherd who beats the cows back to make sure they don't get into the rice fields when the grains are maturing on the rice plants.

But then there are other thoughts that have nothing to do with sensuality—there are thoughts that come from an attitude of renunciation, trying to look for happiness in something besides sensuality—thoughts of good will, thoughts of compassion. Those thoughts, the Buddha said, you can encourage. Let them wander as they like. Like a cow herd during the hot season when the rice has all been harvested: There's no danger of the cows' eating anybody's rice, so they can wander around as they like. You just have to keep mindful where they are.

But then there's the problem that even good thinking, if you think for a whole day, can tire you out. When the mind is tired, it very easily goes back to unskillful thinking. So to protect your mind, you need concentration, staying with one object so that the mind can have a place to rest, gather its strength.

In this way, you're working both with concentration and with insight, together. In Ajaan Lee's image, it's like a person walking: You use both your left leg and your right leg. If you just hopped around on your right leg or on your left leg, you wouldn't get very far. But if you use your left leg, then your right leg, back and forth, back and forth—stillness, insight, stillness, insight—your insights will get sharper. The stillness will grow stronger. It's in this way that your practice develops in a balanced way.

So even though discernment is what we're aiming at as our primary tool in the path, it needs to be supported by all the other elements of the path as well. In particular, it's supported by right concentration so that it can see clearly. You're standing still, basically, when your mind is in concentration. And when you're standing still, you can see things more clearly. If you're doing delicate work, you can do it a lot more easily. You're not standing on something that's moving around all the time.

And as the different defilements get peeled away, the stillness of the mind grows stronger.

It's in this way that your concentration and insight help each other along.