

Investigative Work

June 20, 2022

Ajaan Chah once said that one of the first things you notice when you really look at the mind is how much it lies to you. It promises happiness through the way it thinks, the way it sees things, and then it doesn't deliver. Actually, it delivers a lot of stress and suffering. Then it hopes you forget. Then it promises more happiness, and it delivers more stress and suffering.

So you've got to learn how to uncover the facts, because, of course, the mind itself is making itself suffer. But all too often, it refuses to admit that. So you have to present it with the facts—and not just the facts, but also the clear picture that it is creating its own suffering, and it would be better off if it actually admitted the truth.

Ajaan Maha Boowa compares meditation to running a court case: Try to get the facts of the case. See who's guilty, who's innocent. You can also compare it to the activity of an investigative reporter. There was a reporter who was very famous when I was younger, who didn't go to the news conferences. Or if he did, he basically wanted to see what the latest lies were. But he spent a lot of time going over public documents: the bits of facts and numbers and things that everybody is too busy to look at, too distracted to look at, doesn't have the patience to look at. But he uncovered all kinds of interesting data: who was spending money for what. It was there on the public record. As he said, because his political views didn't go with those in the mainstream, the only way he was going to get people to admit the truth was to present public facts, not just come with his theories.

It's the same way with the meditation: You've got to look at the facts. What's going on in your mind right now? The Buddha says we're suffering from clinging-aggregates. It's not the aggregates that are clinging. It's just that clinging is so tied up in the aggregates that, for the time being, it's hard for us to see which is which—which is the clinging, which is the aggregate. As the Buddha said, they're not totally separate, but they're not the same thing. If they were the same thing, there would be no way to have an experience of anything at all without suffering. But it is possible for arahants to experience the aggregates without clinging and without suffering.

How are you going to figure how to do that? After all, it *is* something you have to figure out. We don't just sit here and watch and let everything become clear on its own. One of the things we've got to learn how to do is to get some control over our thoughts, get the mind as quiet as possible, because we're so constantly

bombarded by thoughts that we don't have any opportunity to see the thoughts clearly. It's only when we can get the mind really still, and then notice what happens when it starts to think, that we can begin to see that there are steps in the process.

So when you're meditating, any thoughts that don't have anything to do with the breath are suspect. Think of them that way. Part of the mind will say, "But they're *my* thoughts. I'm used to these thoughts." Well, our politicians are *our* politicians, but they still lie. We want to figure out where the lies are, where the truth is. So we step back. Try to get the mind as still as you can, and catch it as it tries to slip off.

In the beginning, you'll find that you've slipped off for a long time before you realize you've gone. But as you get better and better at this, you get quicker, and you can begin to read the steps, see where you're actually making choices. Sometimes they're very quick, but they're there. When you get things quiet inside, when you get things still, then the steps become clearer to see. This is like poring through the public record. You'll be going after one fact after another, one distraction after another. Sometimes you'll miss the meaning of the distraction or miss the steps; other times you'll see them clearly. Then you go back to the breath.

You begin to realize that when a thought forms, there's going to be a stirring in the energy of the breath, like a little knot. You learn how to zap it before it turns into either a thought or a breath sensation. There's a point where you're choosing: "Is this going to be a physical sensation? Or am I going to take this to be a thought?" Then the question is, a thought about what? Sometimes the topic seems to come ready-made. Other times you just say, "Well, here's an opportunity to think. Let's see what I can think about, what I *want* to think about right now." But there are choices being made. The more quickly you can zap the thought—in other words, breathe right through it—the earlier and earlier in the process you begin to see where the stages begin.

You also begin to see: There's craving and clinging, and they're not necessarily the same thing as the thought. The thoughts are suspect. Ajaan Maha Boowa talks about this a lot: When the investigation is going on, everything is suspect. But when you clearly see where the real culprits are, then the stolen goods can be given back to their owners, and there's no more suspicion around them.

In other words, your aggregates, which were the thoughts that you had to be suspicious about: You begin to realize that as long as you don't cling to them and you've learned how to see where the clinging is and you can stop it, then the thoughts are okay. It's not as if we're cutting off our mental processes.

This is an image that seems to come very frequently both inside Buddhist circles and out: that we're meditating so that we don't think, so that we don't respond, so that we don't analyze things. We're told that the less you figure things out, the better. But here, you actually have to figure out: Where is the step where the clinging comes in in a thought? How do you recognize it? It doesn't come with labels attached. You have to notice: When this particular kind of thought comes in, what's the response in the mind? When *that* kind of thought comes in, what's the response in the mind? You have to be able to separate them out.

Once you separate them out, then the innocent parts are innocent. They can go back home, and they're free to live their lives normally. In other words, arahants can still think. They still plan. But they've learned how to do it without the attachment.

So we're not cutting off our mental faculties here. We cut them off for the time being as we get the mind into concentration. That's because we're looking for the facts. It's a tedious job sometimes, but it's made easier by the fact that we learn how to stay with the breath in a way that's comfortable. But still, there will be a part of the mind that complains: "I want to think!" The pleasure of the breath is nice, but it'll come and say, "Well, I've had enough pleasure. Can I go back to my old habits?" This is where you've got to say, No. We're not just following our desire for pleasure. We're using pleasure to make it easier to do some difficult work: tracking down the evidence, learning how to interpret it, until we clearly see exactly where the culprits are. Who's making this suffering? Feelings, perceptions, thought-constructs—they're not making the suffering. It's the clinging. When you can separate that out, then the aggregates are freed, and you're freed from them.

Ajaan Lee makes this point: He talks about the different consciousnesses in your body. When you learning how to stop laying claim to them, you have your freedom; they have their freedom. They're no longer being commandeered in ways that go against their nature. As in the image of the fire: The fire is burning because it's clinging. It's trapped in its fuel because it's clinging. The fuel's not trapping it. The fire's own clinging is doing the trapping. When it lets go, it's freed and goes out. The fuel is freed as well.

In the same way, you learn how to let go of your clinging to the aggregates, because you've seen exactly where the clinging is. Then the aggregates are free, and *you're* free, too. Everybody can live together in peace. Our *khandhas* can still think; they can still have intentions, still make plans. But there's no more guilt. There's no more attempt to steal the things of nature and turn them into yours.

So when you're in the stage of gathering the data, remind yourself: It's not always going to be this way. The part of the mind that wants some entertainment out of its thoughts has to be placated. But at the same time, you have to be strict with it. You're trying to learn the processes: How are these thoughts put together? What are the steps? Where does suffering enter into the series of steps? Then, can we avoid making that step?

These are things you've got to find by doing the grunt work, poring over the public documents—because the facts are here. They're all out in the open. This is what that investigative reporter said: The facts are there in the books. It's just that people are too lazy to look in the books. They're there for anybody to see. What your mind is doing is there for you to see, but you have other agendas—or at least you've had other agendas in the past. There's that part of the mind that wants to stick with the old agendas.

Well, you've got a new agenda now. Try to ferret the facts of the case so that you can figure out who's guilty, who's not, what you have to do to change your habits. Show the mind that it's suffering because it's lying to itself. If it didn't lie to itself, it wouldn't suffer. When it sees that it's actually to its advantage to admit the truth of these processes, that's when it's no longer guilty. That's when it no longer lies.