

## *Think*

*July 15, 2022*

When we built the chedi, the spired monument at Wat Dhammasathit, the architect was a fan of the Finnish architect, Eero Saarinen. The lines were very clean, very graceful.

A couple years later, Ajaan Fuang and I flew around the world. We came to America to visit my family, among other things, and we flew into Dulles Airport in Washington, which had also been designed by Saarinen. That was back in the days when you landed at Dulles and went right into the main terminal, which has a big roof shaped like a hammock. So I pointed it out to Ajaan Fuang. I thought he might be interested. He took one glance at it, didn't say anything—that was it. So I figured he wasn't interested.

A couple weeks later, though, when we got back to Thailand, I learned that he had described the roof in great detail to the architect: talking about how it was an amazing piece of architecture. I mention this just to point out that Ajaan Fuang was extremely observant. He could glance at something very quickly and take it all in.

So, think about that when you hear that his meditation instructions tended to boil down to two things: One, be observant, and two, use your ingenuity. *Really* be observant, understand cause and effect—watch what you're doing. Watch the results very carefully, and if they're good, keep it up. If not, you've got to figure out how to change.

He talked about one time when he was a young monk just getting started. The meditation instructions back in those days were very simple. He didn't have Ajaan Lee's Seven Steps because Ajaan Lee hadn't formulated the Seven Steps yet. The basic instructions were just to get the mind to settle down, or in Thai it was basically to *bring* the mind down: *hai cit long*. So he forced it down, down, down, and it got very heavy and unpleasant. So he figured, "This must not be right. Turn it around. How about bring it up, up, up, up, up." So he brought it up, way up—but that wasn't right either. Eventually, he found the right balance. But it meant that he thought about things—tried to find solutions to the problems. That became the basic pattern of his meditation.

You see this throughout the forest tradition—the emphasis on thinking. There's a great passage in Ajaan Maha Boowa: There had been a controversy in Bangkok. There was a group that claimed that nibbāna was your *true self*, so a lot of scholarly monks came out and said, "No, no, nibbāna is *not-self*."

The controversy became so heated that it actually got into the newspapers. Can you imagine the *New York Post* running articles on whether nibbāna is self or not-self? That's basically what you had in Thailand. Even the ordinary everyday newspapers, not just the highly regarded ones, got involved in the fray.

Someone took the question to Ajahn Maha Boowa and asked him whether nibbāna was self or not-self. His answer was, “Nibbāna is nibbāna. Self, not-self: these are perceptions. You use these perceptions on the path, but when you get to nibbāna, you’ve got to let go of all perceptions.” As he was delivering this answer he kept saying, *phicaranaa si*, which in Thai basically means *Think!* Use your brains.

It’s a theme throughout the forest tradition. Of course, it’s a theme in the Buddha’s teachings, too. He talks about how to listen to the Dhamma and put it into practice. You start out by listening well. As he says, “You lend ear.” You actually try to remember what you’ve heard, and then you try to penetrate the meaning. In other words, figure out what it means, and then you contemplate it. “Ponder it,” he says, until it makes sense.

See that it fits in with the rest of the Dhamma you’ve learned, *how* it fits in with the rest of the Dhamma. Because it is supposed to fit in. As the Buddha said, that’s one of the tests for Dhamma: It’s that it’s consistent. It leads consistently to certain goals. It has its *attha*, its purpose or goal. It all has to work together to *aim* to that goal—the goal of release. Once you see that it makes sense, that gives rise to a desire to practice, followed by a willingness to submit yourself to what you’ve learned. And there he says, you *contemplate*. So, you don’t just ponder it to make sure that it makes sense, but you contemplate how it’s going to apply in your own case. You’ve got to think this through.

When you hear a Dhamma talk, it often deals in generalities or general principles, principles that are right for people at large. As we pointed out yesterday: Generally, I advise people not to force the breath into different parts of the body, but there are times, there are exceptions, and sometimes you find that you’re dealing with an exception. So be alive to that, contemplate that, use your ingenuity, and then put forth effort.

The effort has to rely on your thinking powers. There’s no place where the Buddha ever says that the rational mind is an enemy, or that the rational mind gets in the way. The Dhamma is all supposed to make sense, and if it doesn’t make sense, you have to ask yourself, “Okay, where is my sense of *making sense* lacking here?” Because it all fits.

I know one prominent case where people interpret the Dhamma so that it doesn’t fit. This is where they interpret mindfulness as being a broad, accepting, open state of mind where you don’t make any choices, don’t pass any judgments. Whereas, with concentration and right effort, you have to develop certain states in the mind and reject other states.

The question is, how can you do all of those things at the same time? After all, the path is supposed to come together. One solution that somebody proposed was that the Buddha actually taught two paths: a sixfold path of right mindfulness, and a sevenfold path of right effort and right concentration. But that doesn’t make any sense.

You have to go back and see where the definitions are wrong. Actually, mindfulness is not an open accepting state of mind. Mindfulness has its agendas. You’re trying to *keep*

something in mind—in the case of the body in and of itself, you’re trying to keep with the breath right now—and you’re ardent, alert, and mindful.

*Alert* means alert to what you’re doing, and to the results you’re getting. *Ardent* means that you’re trying to do this well, trying to do this skillfully. As the Buddha said, when mindfulness is a governing principle in your practice, if there’s anything unskillful in the mind or your behavior, you try to get rid of it. If there’s anything that’s skillful that hasn’t developed yet, you try to give rise to it. And when it’s there, you try to maintain it.

In other words, instead of watching things coming and going, arising and passing away, without interfering, you’re actively trying to get good qualities to arise and trying to prevent them from passing away. When you understand mindfulness that way, then it fits perfectly in with right effort and right concentration, because right concentration is the result of this. And right effort, of course, is there in the ardency.

So think. And try to think in a way that solves problems. A lot of people use their thinking to create problems. The Buddha shows how to think in his treatment of questions: questions that are to be answered categorically, those that have to be analyzed before you answer them, those that require cross-questioning, and those that should be put aside. One of the important parts of developing your discernment is that you learn which kind of question falls into which category—to realize there are some issues that, no matter how much you think about them, are not going to get you anywhere on the path. Other questions have to be answered in a straightforward way. You have to figure out which is which.

And you have to develop the discernment that the Buddha says is like an archer’s skills: able to shoot far distances, able to fire shots in rapid succession, able to pierce great masses.

Firing shots in rapid succession, he says, is basically seeing the four noble truths. What this means is you watch the mind and notice when it’s creating stress and when it’s not creating stress. Sometimes it goes back and forth very quickly. You can gain an insight and then immediately latch on to it. Okay, the insight was good, it’s part of the path, but the latching on to it is going to cause more suffering—which is why you have to be quick.

Shooting far distances means seeing implications. There’s that passage in the Not-self Discourse where the Buddha talks about how you look at the five aggregates and you see that they’re inconstant, stressful, not-self. But you don’t stop there. You think about the implications. Whatever you remember about the past, even if you remember past lives, just comes down to these five aggregates. And wherever you might go in the future of this life and the future of other lives is going to be composed of these same aggregates.

You think about the implications of that.

You realize that no matter where you go, no matter what you would latch on to, it’s not worth latching on to. You think about the consequences; you think about the implications. As you think about them, that insight into how the aggregates right here in the present

moment are not worth latching on to makes you less and less inclined to want to come back at all. It makes you more and more inclined to want to get out.

That desire to get out comes from the fact that you *thought*.

And finally, piercing great masses: You're able to pierce your ignorance. In other words, when you're looking at something, and you see that there's stress, okay, well, turn around and look inside: That's where the big mass of ignorance is.

Our attention, for the most part, gets directed outside, outside, outside. Even when we're practicing meditation, we're watching certain events in the mind, but who's doing the watching? The observations about what you're watching: Do they apply to the watcher as well? They do. That's where the ignorance is, so turn around and look.

If you develop this all-around set of skills, then your thinking really does lead to discernment, and the discernment does lead to release.

When we look at the Canon—all those suttas, all that analysis—we realize: This is not the fruit of a mind that didn't think. The Buddha thought very carefully, thought very skillfully, thought with a lot of circumspection. So, when you meditate and you're reflecting on what you're doing, you've got to learn *how* to think. Think in a way that cuts to the chase, that sees things as they're happening, and doesn't create a lot of needless issues.

Years back, I remember, one of my students had gone to a retreat with an ajaan who liked to talk about life as an interplay of the relative and the absolute. He sent everybody home to contemplate their lives as an interplay of the relative and the absolute. So my student came to me and asked a question about this, and the question was so convoluted that I had to stop her. I said, "Look, just drop that issue. It's not useful, because it's dealing in abstractions. The Buddha didn't deal in abstractions. He dealt in watching realities: watching your actions and watching the results."

Those are things you can look at and think about without the abstractions. And you can see: This action causes stress. This action leads away from stress. Keep it simple like that, and things open up. That's when you know you're using your thinking powers in the right way.