

The Role of the Observer

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There are many things in the practice that we have to learn how to tolerate: physical pain, unpleasant words. There are also things we're told *not* to tolerate. Any unskillful thoughts that come into the mind, the Buddha says that we should abandon them, destroy them, dispel them, wipe them out of existence. How do you do that? There are two main ways that he recommends. He says there are some causes of suffering that go away when you simply look at them. Those are the ones that you ordinarily indulge in without really paying attention to what you're doing, but if you stop and look at what you're doing, you realize that "This is stupid, this is ridiculous," and that's enough to let them go.

There are others, though, that are not so obviously ridiculous. Those are the ones that you may know are unskillful, but part of the mind really likes them. You've got a battle going on in the mind, and that's the area where the Buddha says that you have to "exert a fabrication."

Now, we know the different kinds of fabrication. There's the breath, which is bodily fabrication; directed thought and evaluation, when you set a topic in mind and then think about it, ask questions, make comments—that's verbal fabrication. Then there are perceptions and feelings—the labels we put on things and the feeling tones we focus on—pleasant, unpleasant, neither-pleasant-nor-unpleasant: Those are mental fabrications. Those are our tools, our weapons in our internal battle over those thoughts that come into the mind and just seem to hang on because there's part of the mind hanging on to them.

It's like Ajaan Lee's comment about food. We're the ones who are attached to the food. If there's a plate of rice and we don't eat it, the rice doesn't cry. We're the ones who cry when there's nothing to eat. So there's an internal battle, and that's not won simply by watching, although watching may be one of the steps. After all, when you really can't figure out what's going on, one of the best things to do is to say, "I'll just sit with it for a while." But in sitting with it, you're creating an identity in this committee you have in the mind: the identity of the watcher. And you're going to hold on to that. This inner observer: The more solid you can make it, the better off you are, because it'll help you get through a lot of things.

Ajaan Maha Boowa talks about how after Ajaan Mun passed away, he stopped to think: What was the lesson he had learned from Ajaan Mun that was most valuable in saving him from lots of misunderstandings in his practice? He remembered one piece of advice in particular: When something comes up that you're not sure of whether it's good or bad, just go to the knower inside—the sense of awareness itself. Stay there, and whatever has come is going to pass." Now, in that case, he's probably thinking about realizations that come in the course of the practice that may or may not be true. But the same principle also applies to things that you know are unskillful but you don't understand why the mind still goes for them. You watch for a

while, but it's watching with a purpose: watching to figure out where would the part of the mind that likes the unskillful thinking show itself for what it is. Where it would show its stupidity.

Now, this observer is something you put together. It's protected by a perception and there's a background running commentary, basically telling you, "Stay right here. Stay right here. Just watch." It's one of the roles you take on as you try to establish the meditator as a powerful member of your inner committee. It is a temporary measure, but stay with it for a while. You're using it for the purpose of figuring things out. Ajaan Maha Boowa, when he defines insight, says that it's exploration. You're trying to figure things out. So look around.

When the Buddha talks about seeing the origination of something unskillful, that requires that you look around in places where you might not expect to see it—places that you overlook. What comes together with that thought? What comes together with that mood? When the mood passes away, when the thought passes away, what else passes away in the mind?

This requires some active observation, and not just passive observation. You have to ask questions. If a certain attitude comes into the mind that seems to be an enemy to your meditation, ask yourself, "Where did that attitude come from? Who might I have picked that up from?" That's a way of separating yourself from it. It's only when you see yourself as separate from these things—instead of saying, "This is my thought; this is my mood"—that you can actually see them for what they are. You may tell yourself, "Okay, I won't have any sense of self around this," but all too often, in a case like that, your sense of self—your identity around these things—goes underground. So you have to be really observant. Ask questions. Be inquisitive. This is how we understand suffering: We comprehend it by being inquisitive.

The Buddha says we suffer because of our clinging. How are we clinging? These thoughts come into the mind, and a large part of you doesn't like them, but another part does. Well, what is the part that does? What is the part that holds on to them, and why? When you can see that, you can begin to dig out the causes of the suffering and abandon them. Remember, you don't abandon the suffering, you abandon the cause. What's the desire that underlies that particular type of thinking? Sometimes, you're thinking, "Well, this is a thought I don't like. It's worrying me, driving me crazy with worry. Why would I like to worry?" Well, there's part of the mind that feels responsible when you worry. Feels virtuous. That's part of the allure. That's what you're looking for, of course, after seeing the origination and the passing away: You want to see the allure. Why do you go for this? Then can you compare the allure with the drawbacks to the point where the mind really does admit, well, yes, this is stupid. It admits on its own, not because it's trying to be a good meditator, but because you really see for yourself that "This really does make no sense at all—this type of thinking, this mood that I'm obsessed by."

So exerting fabrications sometimes means fabricating the sense of the knower, just to observe what's going on. It also means learning how to have a conversation inside. Ask

questions. That's the exploratory part of the insight. Ask questions that are glancing—in other words, questions that come from the side. Questions that your defilements might not expect. Those are the ones that reveal things. As the Buddha said, it's only through discernment that we cut through these things. Mindfulness is like a dam. It holds things in check for a while. The ability to watch something, hold yourself back, not engage in it: That holds things in check, but it doesn't solve the problem. The solution to the problem comes from insight. And insight is often unexpected, so ask some unexpected questions. Surprise your defilements. Catch them off guard.

There's a poet, John Keats, who talked about having negative capability: the ability to be with things and not ask questions, not try to figure them out. All too often the practice is depicted as a kind of negative capability. And to the extent that we watch things when we don't understand them, it *is* something like that, but that's only part of the solution. The other part is to be more active, proactive.

Of course, there are times when the mind is too weak to do anything but try to hold itself back and not indulge in its unskillful thoughts. And when it just doesn't understand what's going on, that's a time just to be quiet and watch. Have the humility to be willing to watch—but also have the humility to realize that you're not going to outwit your defilements that way. You have to engage the active part of your mind when you can, because only when you figure these things out will you get beyond them.