

## *Setbacks*

*May 2003*

The mind is a complex thing. So it only stands to reason that the training of the mind is going to have to be complex as well, involving lots of different factors that you have to bring into balance.

In broad terms, the training comes down to three things: virtue, concentration and discernment. They feed off one another. The standard explanation is that virtue nurtures concentration, concentration nurtures discernment, discernment leads to release. But the actual Pali explanation of this is that, “Concentration nurtured with virtue leads to great rewards. Discernment nurtured with concentration leads to great rewards. When the mind is nurtured with discernment, then it’s released from the effluents.” In other words, there is the possibility of having concentration without virtue or having discernment without concentration, but in cases like that they don’t lead to great rewards.

It’s also not necessary that when you’re virtuous, the mind becomes concentrated or when you’re concentrated, you gain discernment. These things are not billiard balls, where you hit one and that goes to hit the next and that goes to hit the next and you get the last ball into the pocket. It’s not that neat a process.

The mind is a lot more organic, has many more loose ends that have to be tied together. Which is why even though the practice seems so neat and clearly laid out in the texts, when you actually sit down and are dealing with your mind, there comes a question, “Well, what do I do now?”

The heart of the practice is the concentration. There’s a sutta where the Buddha points out that of all the factors of the path, noble right concentration forms the heart, and everything else is its requisite: something that helps it along. So it’s always good to have the mind in as good a state of concentration as you can.

When the life around that concentration is a virtuous life, that makes the concentration a lot easier, because you’re not doing and saying things that fill you with regret that would get in the way of the concentration.

But of all the elements of the path, the concentration is also the hardest. It’s the one that you have to exert the most effort in order to wrestle the mind down.

The discernment is a lot more precise. In some cases, it does come without your having to do much of anything at all. You work on the concentration, try to get more and more precise in how you practice it, how you understand it, how you apply it to different situations, and in the mastery of concentration a lot of discernment comes into play.

But then many of the insights that come as you're doing the concentration are not intended. Concentration is something you can intend. Insight you can't intend. You can work on it, you can analyze things, you can question things, but whether or not you're going to get a good answer depends on a lot of factors coming together in the right way.

So it's trial and error. And as in any trial-and-error process, there are going to be ups and downs. As you're working on the concentration, you'll find that some days it goes well, and other days it doesn't go so well.

This is where your ability to deal with setbacks come in. This is an important skill in the practice: the ability to pick yourself up, dust yourself off, and keep on going.

And there are various aspects to this skill. One is learning how to look at things over the long run. Just because there's a setback doesn't mean that you're in an inexorable downward trend. Things can get set back for a while and they come back up. So when things aren't going the way you'd like them to, take it as an opportunity to ask questions, "Okay, what did you do to get things down?"

This is why this is a good place to practice, because the factors of what you're doing in the course of the day get simplified to a great deal. If you had a job where you had to deal with and lots and lots of people, it'd be hard to separate out exactly what you said, what you did in the course of the day that set the mind off or set it into a tailspin.

Here at the monastery, though, where the number of activities you have in the course of the day, the amount of personal interaction you have in the course of the day, are limited like this, it's a lot easier to pinpoint a certain thing you said, a certain thing you did, a certain thought that you allowed to take over the mind. When you can pinpoint things in these ways, it's a lot easier to compensate for them.

That's one part of looking at the bright side of a downswing: That it's an opportunity to learn something. You thought things were going well, everything was taken care of, and all of a sudden you're shown an area where more work needs to be done. Well, don't let yourself get upset. Just realize that there's more to this than you may have thought. After all, we're training the whole mind and not just a few random skills.

We're also not trying to put the mind through a meat-grinder—in other words, just taking one single technique and drumming away at it. If you did that, the mind would rebel, sometimes in strange ways.

But when you think of this as an all-around practice, then you find that when you get stymied in one area, you can focus on something else. When the

concentration isn't going so well, you can practice endurance, you can practice patience. And not just a mindless patience: You want the patience that gives you an opportunity to look and question. So it, too, is an opportunity to develop a little bit more insight. Because the two processes have to go along together: the insight and the concentration.

Ajaan Lee compares them to two feet when you're walking. You can't walk on just one foot. Simply hopping on one foot gets you worn out. You have to go back and forth. And if you ever watched a child learning how to walk: in the beginning, it's awkward. The child is not quite sure which muscles are necessary, which muscles aren't. But over time it gets easier and easier as the child pays attention.

If we approach the meditation with an attitude of patience, it gets a lot easier. Realize that this is a long-term project, a big project. There's a lot to be learned.

And it's learned by being observant, by making mistakes and learning from them. We don't like to make mistakes. Everyone wants the path neatly marked out so that they don't have to go back and forth, wandering off into the brush, losing the trail. But you learn a lot about the trail if you're in a situation where the wandering off doesn't get too serious or isn't too great a setback.

So it's a lot easier when you take the long-term view about this practice. There will be setbacks, there will be times when you wander off, but if you're observant, you can catch yourself, put yourself back on the trail. And you've learned an important lesson in the meantime.

Ajaan Fuang once said that back in the days of Ajaan Mun and Ajaan Sao they didn't give very detailed meditation instructions. Apparently Ajaan Sao would say, "Meditate and bring your mind down." That was it. It was up to you to figure out what it means to bring the mind down. Ajaan Fuang said he practiced for a while just thinking, "down, down, down, down, down." And as he thought, "down, down, down," the body got heavier and heavier, and things got more and more unpleasant. So he realized, "This must not be what he meant." So he told himself, "Okay, meditate up, up, up, up, up!" He played with this for a while and learned a lot in the course of making a lot of false moves.

From our point of view, it might seem wasteful, but there's a lot you can learn from your mistakes. We don't like it, but it's an essential part of learning. Otherwise it all gets too facile—you know this and you know that—but do you really know it? Have you ever been in the middle of trying to figure out your greed or figure out your anger or figure out your delusion? Have you really wrestled with these things? It's only when you wrestle with them that you learn what their weak points are, where they can be overcome. Even if you don't overcome them the first time around, you learn something about them in the course of battling them—

better than just lying there still and letting them trample all over you.

There's something exhilarating about taking on a really big project like this. Otherwise, we just go through life sort of bumping into things a little bit and bouncing off. We follow the path of least resistance. After a while, there's no weight to our lives, no heft, because the really important issues keep getting avoided. We don't want to go there, so we read a book about it and figure out what it's like and say, "Well, I don't have to go there now. I've already read the book," and then you move on to something else.

If you end up that way, life is just a matter of wandering around and not really getting anything accomplished, not really digging into anything and learning from the hard knocks. In this case, the hard knocks are not physical hard knocks. They're more mental hard knocks.

But if you take it as part of the practice of learning how to gain release for the mind, the mind is not damaged by these things. It's actually strengthened by the effort you put into it. Even when it seems to be stymied sometimes, you gain practice in learning to refine your determination so that it just doesn't come in spurts. It becomes something continuous. You can keep at it, keep at it, keep at it, no matter how difficult it may seem and no matter how much you may seem to be at a dead-end.

If you have the conviction there's a way out, you find it. Better than the person who doesn't have that kind of conviction. If you lack that conviction, then no matter what, you get stuck in someplace and think, "Well this is it! No way out." And you give up. You're lost.

But if you're convinced there must be a way out, that gives you the chance to find it. In that way, in spite of your setbacks, you learn.

If you've been through the setbacks, then you can explain them to other people. The people who have a really easy time meditating—everything goes by the textbook—don't have much they can teach others. There's nothing they can explain, because they haven't really wrestled with it. But when it's been hard, you don't forget.

Always have that determination, always have that confidence that you can get through. If you can keep that confidence alive, then you find that you can handle just about anything.

That way, the whole mind gets trained. Not just a specific technique in concentrating but a whole approach to how to deal with the thoughts as they come into the mind: how you can direct them, how you can marshal your energy for when you can really need a lot of energy, and other times when you can deal with the more delicate or refined issues that come up.

So it's not a neat process. It's not like school where you're told, "Take this course and then take that course and then at the very end we'll give you a diploma." It doesn't work out that way. There are lots of subjects you've got to study all at once. Sometimes, with the things you thought you learned, it turns out you didn't really know them and you've got to go back to square one.

But if you learn this quality of persistence, endurance, patience—being able to stick with things—you've got what it takes. Sometimes the issues require a fair amount of delicacy and it takes a while to take them apart. When you learn these qualities and develop these qualities, you find that they'll see you through. They're just as important a part of the training of the mind as the qualities you see more fully explained in the books. They're what you bring to the practice, what you gain from the practice in the sense of developing the whole mind all-around.

Ajaan Lee has an image: He says trees that give fruit very quickly are like banana trees. They give fruit and then they die. There's not much substance to them. The trees that take a long time, though: Those are the ones that grow lots of branches. They can give you lots of shade, provide lots of fruit.

So take heart. You're working on a big tree here. Something substantial. Something that will have lot of uses when you're done. And will give you lots of good benefits along the way.