

Working Ourselves Free

August 3, 2005

One of the Pali terms for meditation is *kammattana*, which means the work we have to do. We don't like to think of the meditation as work. We like to think of it as letting go, being at ease, but doing that consistently is work. It requires that we develop a lot of very important qualities in the mind: mindfulness, alertness, persistence, right effort. One of the Thai terms for meditation is *tham khwaam phien*. It means to make an effort. This doesn't mean that you have to do walking meditation for five hours or sitting meditation for ten hours or to wear down the body. The effort is an effort in the mind: taking care, being mindful, being aware, and doing that consistently. It's not all that difficult to be able to allow the mind to settle down, relax, let go, be still for a while. What's difficult is making it continuous.

Ajaan Fuang once said there are three steps to meditation. The first is learning how to do it, second is learning how to maintain it, and third is learning how to put it to use. The maintaining is where most of the work comes in. In other words, we don't meditate just to get the mind to have a little space of calm and then throw it away. Once the mind has attained calm, you have to learn how to respect that calm, look after it, protect it. In the course of doing that, you're going to find that you learn an awful lot about the mind: the way the mind is going to slip off, how it slips off. If you look carefully, you're going to see these things. This is where the insight comes into the meditation.

The Buddha never made a clear line of distinction between tranquility practice and insight practice. Everything he gathered together in the practice of *jhāna*, or absorption. He said that to do it right, *jhāna* has to build both on tranquility and on insight. You need to get the mind to settle down some, and you need to understand the mind to at least some extent before you can get it to stay there. This is where the insight comes in. As you get the mind to settle down, you find it's going to move. It'll say, "Okay, it's nice to rest, it's nice to have a little bit of peace, but there are all these other things we have to do." Well, look into the mind that says that. That's the troublemaker. The problem is that oftentimes it sneaks up on you when you're not looking, which is why you have to keep on looking continually.

Then, bit by bit, you begin to see these things: You see how mindfulness lapses, how the mind throws up little walls of ignorance so that it can do things without acknowledging them. That's a lot of the problem right there: these barriers the

mind sets up inside itself, like little screens to hide things from itself. It's a peculiar habit we have. One part of the mind is lying to another part of the mind. Part of the mind actually does get fooled and another part really knows what's going on but it pretends not to. This make-believe is what causes so much trouble in the mind. You've got to learn how to see through it, and the seeing through it comes when you try to be consistently still.

So you get the breath comfortable. Breathing in it feels good; breathing out it feels good. Then work on the subtler breath sensations in the body, patterns of tension, say, in the chest, in the shoulders, the back, the legs, the hips, because that's a form of breath energy as well. Think of everything relaxing all the way out to the pores. Every pore. Think of the body as a big sponge, with all the pores open, and see how long you can maintain that awareness. Often there's a subtle breath energy that'll squeeze up when you're ready to latch on to something. It'll squeeze up when your mindfulness lapses, when your alertness gets less than alert. Then you find the mind scrambling around trying to find other ways to start thinking about things. You want to look into that, but look into it while you're trying to maintain that sense of ease.

A lot of insight is little things you see in the mind that you catch out of the corner of your mental eye as the mind is trying to play tricks on itself, or certain thoughts try to play tricks on the mind, to distract you. Once you're distracted, they can sneak in, pull their sack over your head, stuff you in the sack, drag you off, and throw you in the East River. By the time you come up, you've been swept out to sea, and it's time to start all over again. But the quicker you are in sensing these things, the less likely they'll be able to kidnap you.

So this is where the work lies, in trying to maintain that sense of ease, that sense of being fully aware of the whole body, with all the subtle breath energies, all the way out to the pores of skin, as open and free flowing as possible. It's an interesting type of work. It's work in being at ease, work in being open, relaxed, but very vigilant. Otherwise, you'll have periods of concentration and periods when concentration disappears. Then, when it disappears, all kinds of things can come running into your mind. The next time you come to sit down and meditate, it's as if it's a different mind, with a whole new cast of characters. You have to sort them out again—to see which is the irritation, which is the laziness, how to counteract the irritation and how to counteract the laziness, after they've taken over the mind.

It's a lot easier if you're there recognizing them when they come, when they seem tender and innocent and no big deal at all. That's why you've got to be vigilant, because they're a lot easier to deal with when they're still small and weak.

This means you need discernment to recognize them for what they are and also to see which parts of the mind are your fifth column, the ones that are all too ready to play along with distractions.

In other words, for concentration to give rise to insight, it has to be as consistent and continuous as possible. That's the work. That's the right effort. Remember right effort? Trying to get rid of unskillful mental qualities, trying to prevent them from arising if they haven't arisen yet. And what's going to prevent them from arising? A sense of ease, a sense of well-being, with the vigilance watching over it. Then there's the effort of giving rise to skillful qualities that haven't arisen yet, and maintaining and developing the ones that have. And these are the skillful qualities you want to focus on: your alertness, your mindfulness, your concentration, and your discernment. Underlying all this is a sense of heedfulness, that what you're doing is really important. As soon as you're the least bit careless, all kinds of things can come crawling up out of the cracks in your mind.

So it's not just letting go, and it's not just putting in a lot of effort. It's learning how to let go and keep letting go, to stay at ease, to stay open, and be very meticulous about maintaining that, very protective of that state of mind. That's the way in which concentration will let you see things in the mind—the things that have kept you bound, kept you trapped, kept you limited—so that you can free yourself from the trap.