

Monastery Standard Time

September 20, 2005

Here at the monastery, there's a rhythm that's very different from the rhythm of lay life. And the difference is paradoxical. On the one hand, the day seems very long, especially when you're new here and are new to the meditation. There's nothing much to fill up the day. In fact, the length of the day sometimes seems threatening. But as you begin to get better at the meditation, you begin to notice the other side of the difference, which is that the days go very fast because there are not so many sharp ups and downs from day to day to day, and the days are pretty much the same. After a while, a week, a month, several months, a year, seems go very fast.

In lay life, people talk about having a good day, as if that were the biggest unit of time they can think about. Whereas here, life goes in larger seasons, larger cycles. And it's useful for getting perspective on your mind, because the mind has a lot of ups and downs. We can ride the ups and downs like a roller coaster, and in riding them, we often exaggerate them. The ups go higher up, and the downs go further down.

What we need inside the mind is the equivalent of a monastery, a part of the mind that lives by a different rhythm, that can stay on an even keel even in the midst of the ups and downs. Ajaan Lee gives the image of a bowl full of water taken out of the ocean and set on the beach. The ocean may have waves, but once you separate that bowlful of water, it doesn't have the waves like the ocean. Same water, but it's got a different rhythm.

It's important that the mind have that sense of the separate knower, the separate observer, that doesn't get sucked into its moods. Coming to the monastery is one way of developing it. As you work on the meditation, you get used to living in a different rhythm. Even if you can't live here but can come from time to time, it's good to get in touch with a place where there's a different rhythm. It reminds you that not all of the world is living by the rhythms of CNN, the newspapers and magazines, the ups and downs of daily life. There's this part of the world that's separate, and you want to get your mind in tune with it, so that even when you leave the monastery, you can still have a part of the mind that's separate, that can simply observe the ups and downs.

This is one way in which the training takes advantage of the fact that the mind is like a committee. Often that's a problem. There are so many conflicting voices—and they all seem to be shouting all at once—that it's hard to hear yourself think.

And because there are so many different voices, your sense of who you are is essentially made up of lots of conflicting strategies, so there are lots of little selves in there. You train one of them, and the other selves go crawling all over you. It's like the old Thai saying about trying to take live crabs and put them in a basket. As soon as you get them into the basket, they try to crawl right out. As you're searching for new crabs, the old crabs leave.

That's the problem side of having this committee mind. But the advantage is that once you get a couple of members of the mind trained, even if you haven't trained the whole mind, at least you've got some allies in there. You can have that part of the mind that's a separate observer in the midst of all the other ups and downs. Like people who sit quietly over in the corner, while other members of the committee are yelling at each other: The people in the corner don't have to get involved. They can watch and see what's happening and begin to understand the agendas, the tactics that are used by the different members of the committee. You understand them; you can see through them. When you can see through them, you're less likely to get involved with them. You're in a better position to really observe what's going on.

The mind has its rhythms as you train it, and they don't always go the way you like them to. You think it should be this way, it should be that way, you'd like to see a nice straight curve going from the lower left-hand corner of the diagram up to the upper right-hand corner, but it's not like that. It's more jagged. And you can't determine ahead of time where the ups or the downs will be. But you can watch. Once you've trained this observer, you watch the ups and watch the downs, and began to understand them.

Then the understanding becomes more important than whether there's an up or a down. You see the pattern. You see how the mind works. And as you see through it, it becomes less and less of a deceiver. It's less likely to hoodwink you, to take you in.

So it's important that you develop this sense of the observer that can watch whatever's happening in the mind, and not feel that it has to get sucked in, not feel that it has to side with anybody. As part of the practice you do want to side with the skillful tendencies in the mind, but when everything seems confusing, and you can't tell quite what's what, you need to be willing to step back and just watch for a while. You realize that sometimes the mind has these long rhythms and you just have to watch for a very long time, so that you can see through the rhythm, see through the ups and downs. This is your protection.

Ajaan Maha Boowa tells of the time when Ajaan Mun passed away. At first he felt, as he said, like a wild animal with no one to look after his diseases. In the past,

if he had a problem in his meditation, he'd go see Ajaan Mun, and Ajaan Mun would deal with the problem immediately. Cut right through it. Now the question was: Who could do that for him now?

As he thought about this, he began to realize that there were the teachings Ajaan Mun had been giving him all that time. And one that he had stressed over and over again was that when anything comes up in the meditation that you're not sure about, just stay with the sense of the knower and watch. That will protect you from getting carried away by any of the misunderstandings that can come in the meditation.

This is how you protect yourself. Try to get the sense of the knower that's living by a different rhythm from everyone else in the mind. They may go up and down, but it doesn't have to go up and down with them. The waves may be churning through the ocean, the tides may be rising and falling, but the water in the bowl up on the beach can stay very still.

As you learn to stay with that stillness, even though there may be waves and tides in the rest of the mind, you're in a position to see them for what they are, and at the very least, you don't have to get sucked in by them. Even better, you may come to understand them: why they rise, why they fall. Over time, you get more and more water out of the ocean and into the bowl. In other words, more and more of the mind becomes the observer, lives by the rhythm of the observer, rather than by the rhythm of the moods that come sweeping through.

So whatever happens in the mind, try to stay with the observer. If you're not sure which way is up or down, just watch for a while. And don't be impatient to want that while to be a very short while. Sometimes it takes a long time. Sometimes it takes months to observe a pattern in the mind. But once you've understood it, it's worth all the time that it takes.

So try to keep your mind on monastic standard time—or at least part of the mind on monastic standard time. The rest of the mind can go live by lay time. But let part of the mind take the long view. Again there's a paradox here: The mind that can take the long view is the one that's very good at being right in the present moment without rising and falling with all the little things that arise and fall in the present. That's how you keep this observer strong.