

Maintenance Work

November 27, 2005

It's not hard to look at the breath or to think about the breath. What's hard to keep on doing it continually, regardless of distractions. But it turns out that the hard part is one that's most important, because then the mind has a good place to settle down. Otherwise, just thinking about the breath becomes just one more place for to travel to. The sticking with it is what makes a difference.

A lot of meditation is maintenance work, maintaining your intention to stick with the breath. It's like the monastery here. Not that much construction work goes on, but a lot of maintenance work does: sweeping every day, cleaning every day. In the forest monasteries in Thailand, there's even less construction work but the maintenance work continues. The ajaans may discourage the monks from getting involved in construction but they strongly encourage them to stay with the maintenance, to develop these habits—the habit of seeing that there's something good and you want to keep it good, so that every day, no matter how tired you are, no matter what you would rather do, you do the maintenance work, because this place is livable only when you keep it up.

There's an old tradition that by sweeping up the monastery, you help to develop your discernment—partly because it's a good way, a very easy way, to keep the place looking good. In other words, if you let the sala or other buildings get so covered with dust that you can't live in them anymore and then you just build a new building to replace them, that would take a lot of work. Instead, you take the easier way out and just keep the buildings dusted, day in, day out, a little bit here, a little bit there, and that keeps the place clean and like new.

At the same time, while you're doing the work, you have time to contemplate. You see the leaves falling off the trees, and there are lessons in the leaves falling off the trees. You swept up the leaves yesterday, yet the trees keep producing more. It's the same with your mind. You cleaned out the defilements today, but if you don't stop the defilements at their source, you'll have more you to clean up tomorrow. Take these lessons and internalize them.

The important thing is you develop this habit of valuing maintenance work. It's good work to do. It's calming, and it really does make a difference. Then take that attitude of valuing maintenance work and apply it to the mind. Just staying with the breath for a few minutes doesn't make that much of a difference. But if you stay with it all day, you find there is a big change in the mind. You get more

and more reliable in your intentions. You get so that you can rely on yourself more. When you can rely yourself, other people can rely on you as well.

And you start noticing the things in your mind much more clearly than if you were moving around all the time. One of Ajaan Fuang's students once complained that since she started meditating, it seemed as if her mind had more defilements than before. He replied that that's simply because she could now see them more clearly. It's like a room. If you don't dust the room, you never notice when more dust falls on the floor. It just becomes part of the same old dust that's been there all along. But if you polish the floor every day, then you notice the least little bit of dust that settles in the course of a day.

You can see this on the pad here in the monastery. If we didn't keep it swept every day, we wouldn't know what animals have been going across the pad at night. But because we keep it swept, we can see their tracks. We know that last night a rabbit came through or something with bigger paws, or birds or snakes.

It may seem tedious and it may seem uninspired, but this inner maintenance work—getting the mind to settle down and then learning how to keep it there—is really important. One of the tricks to maintenance work is to make it as unburdensome as possible, as you see how to stick with the breath most efficiently. It actually takes more work per second to get the mind to settle down than it does to keep it settled down, because you've got to deal with all kinds of distractions that would pull the mind away from the breath. But once it settles down, you find that you can keep it there without having to devote the same intensity of will power.

That way, there's more mental energy for really settling in. And it becomes more and more enjoyable. The ratio of effort put into the meditation to the pleasure that comes out is a lot more favorable: less effort, more pleasure.

Right there is an important lesson in discernment, seeing how efficiently you can keep the mind in place. This is why, when they describe the levels of jhana, the deeper it goes, the fewer activities are involved, because you're getting more efficient in keeping the mind in place, to the point where all you have to do is just be mindful and watching, and you've got whole-body awareness. Everything is still because directed thought and evaluation have done their work. Rapture and pleasure have done their work. They've given you a sense of fullness; they've given you a sense of ease. Now you can just be very contentedly right here in the present moment, very still, using a minimum amount of effort. Everything in the mind seems really right.

A little voice in the mind will come along and say, "Well, enough of this. Let's move on to what's next." Well, no. The next thing is going to be found right here

in the maintenance work. You don't have to go anywhere else. Meanwhile, you're learning how not to identify with those voices that come along and say, "I'm bored," or "Let's get moving here." It's amazing how the mind can be so fickle. You give it a good place to stay and it gets bored. It wants to go out and look for trouble. This is the whole problem of the mind. It can't stay content. It's always finding new ways to make itself suffer.

So look for the voices in the mind that lead you in that direction and learn how not to identify with them. Learn to stick with the Capricorn voices, the ones that say, "Just stick with the work here. Keep going. It's because you stick with it that things will make a difference." Things will change. Meaningfully. The easy change is just jumping around, but that's not meaningful or productive. The productive change comes with sticking with one thing and seeing it clearly all the way through.

You're here to test the Buddha's teachings. He says that your intentions will make a big difference in the mind if you pay attention to them, if you stick with them. So you've got to test that principle. The fact of intention becomes more and more helpful the more harmless you can make it. Can you do that? Well, you've got to stick with it if you want to know. You've got to be really honest with yourself, because otherwise you won't see the little bits of harm that come slipping through when you're looking somewhere else. This means you've got to stick with it continually.

In other words, you're testing your faith in the Buddha's teachings, but you also need a certain amount of faith to stick with the test, to keep learning how to generate the enthusiasm, the sense of wanting to learn the truth of the Buddha's teachings to see how true they are. After all, you look around at all the various alternatives that are out there, and nothing seems nearly as promising: Depend on this god, depend on that god, depend on material things. After you've had enough of those alternatives, if you've really stuck with them for a while, you really get sick of them because they don't provide any real satisfaction.

So here's the Buddha's alternative. Let's stick with this one and see what it provides. You'll run up against boredom for sure, but that doesn't mean it's not working. It just means that here's one more thing you've got to look into, to comprehend. The Buddha is giving you the tools you need to look into it: How does the boredom arise? How does it stay? How does it pass away? You can't see the movement of these things unless you're really, really still with the breath.

So have a strong sense of the value of maintenance work, maintaining your intention, and maintaining any good sensations you've got in the breath as best you can to form the basis for helping that intention along. You learn how to help

the intention by encouraging yourself, by giving yourself a good place to stay. The task becomes lighter and lighter. And by keeping this intention unchanging, you find that it works real changes in the mind.