

## *Reading Your Meditation*

*March 22, 2007*

Each evening when the Dhamma talk starts, remind yourself that you're not here to listen to the talk. You're here to meditate. Give 99% of your attention to the topic of your meditation, and think of the talk as a fence. When your mind wanders off, it runs into the fence. The purpose of the fence is to remind you to go back, not to go further away from the breath, further away from *buddho*, or whatever your topic is. Don't let the talk get in the way of your meditation. If the topic is relevant to what you're doing, it'll come right in without your having to send your attention outside. If it's not relevant, let it go past.

In the past, when people would listen to the Buddha talk about the Dhamma, and gain various levels of awakening. It wasn't because they were focusing so much on what he said, but they were using his words as pointers to what was going on inside their minds. They saw what he was talking about as it appeared in the actions of the mind. Instead of focusing on the arrows that were pointing to the mind, they focused on the mind itself. That's how they were able to gain insight, gain awakening.

So try to bring that attitude to the evening talk. As you meditate, there's a lot to pay attention to in the quality of alertness. It means being alert both to the object of your meditation and alert to how it's going. Ajaan Lee compares this to a belt on a machine that pulls one direction and pulls the other direction, back and forth. In other words, you focus on the object and you turn around to check to see if the mind is solidly with the object, how it's doing, what results you're getting. Then you go back to the object again.

This way, you can monitor your progress and also learn how to read your meditation. When things are going well, you don't have to worry so much about checking up. Just stay with the object. But if you find that you have trouble, you've got to learn how to use your ingenuity to figure out what the problem is and how you can get around it.

Ajaan Fuang used to say that when he was teaching meditation people would come to him with problems he had never had in his meditation, but he found that the seven steps in Ajaan Lee's "Method Two" were a good checklist. If your mind has trouble setting down, ask yourself: Which of the steps is missing? You don't have to think of them so much as sequential steps, but as elements that should be present in a good solid state of concentration: your ability to stay with the breath, to have a center, to experiment with long breathing, short breathing, or long in,

short out; short in, long out; being able to spread the breath to the different parts of the body.

First off, just be sensitive to how the process of breathing feels in the different parts of the body, down your back and shoulders. Do you tend to tense up your shoulders when you breathe? Do you tense up your chest? Where is a good place to focus? Ask these questions so that when things aren't going well, you know what you've been doing, and then you can know what you might change. If you've been focusing on your head and it's making you dizzy or giving you headaches, focus further down in the body. Or if focusing further down in the body makes you sleepy, bring it back up. When you breathe in, does the breath energy seem to go down your spine or is it coming up your spine? Which feels better?

If one way doesn't feel comfortable, just think that it's possible for the energy to go the other direction. You don't have to push it, you don't have to force it, just allow that thought to open that possibility, and you'll be surprised at how much the body can respond simply to the power of thought. Do the different parts of the body seem to be working together as you're breathing in or are they working at cross purposes? Again, through the power of thought, say, "Let's be coordinated here." See what that does.

If you have trouble staying with the breath, there's a passage in the Canon where the Buddha says if focusing on the body creates a sense of dis-ease or you have trouble staying with the body, find a theme that you find inspiring. Focus on that instead. This can be more discursive, although sometimes it's simply repeating the word *buddho*, over and over and over in the mind, thinking of that quality of being awake. Or you can repeat any word that you find inspiring to repeat in the mind.

That's not especially discursive, but sometimes there are discursive themes that can be helpful. Remember, you're bringing an attitude into the meditation. You're often bringing in your life narrative, and if the narrative doesn't seem to be going well, it's hard to drop it. What you've got to do is go back and stitch together a new narrative: the themes of meditation called recollection of generosity, recollection of virtue. In other words, you think about the things you've done in the past that have been good, such as times when you've been generous. If you bring in a negative narrative, you tend to focus on the foolish things you've done. And we've all done foolish things. Sometimes it seems like the only real things in our lives are the foolish things we've done, and the good things seem to be false. That's a skewed perception.

Focusing on the mistakes we made in the past and getting depressed about them is really not helpful, because when you start focusing on your own negative

activities, after a while you get tired of focusing on your own negative activities, and you start focusing on the negative things that other people have done as well. That puts you in a downward spiral. So try to think some of the good things you've done, the times you've been generous when you didn't have to be. Think of the times when you held by your principles even it was really tempting not to follow them. Think of other good things you've done in your life. That way, you can bring a good narrative to the present moment.

This kind of discursive thinking can be an essential part of the meditation, because otherwise if you're bringing in a negative narrative, it's hard to let go and actually be in the present moment. That's because part of you feels that the negative narrative is the truth about the past, and by coming into the present moment and trying to create a sense of well-being here, you're somehow being false to the truth. That creates a conflict inside.

So remind yourself that you can stitch together a totally different narrative from your past actions, and it can be just as true.

Another inspiring theme might be gratitude. Think of the people you're grateful for, the help you've received from other people, the people who make you feel the human race is actually a good place to be.

It's interesting that when the Buddha introduces the doctrine of karma, he doesn't focus on past bad actions, the punishment that's going to come from the mistakes you made in the past. He starts instead with the topics of generosity and gratitude. The fact that we're responsible for our actions means that generosity and gratitude are valid emotions, valid activities. They really do have worth. If we didn't have freedom of choice, what would there be to be grateful for? It'd be like being grateful to a stone for dropping. It drops not because it made any choice to drop, but simply because that's what gravity does, it makes stones drop. Generosity also wouldn't have much meaning. But the fact we do make choices in our lives, is what allows generosity and gratitude to be valid.

Think of things that put the mind in a positive mood, so that it finally is ready and willing to come into the present moment and put the good narrative aside so that you can focus on the breath right here. You've been fortunate enough to find a way of training the mind, which means you've done something good in the past.

As the Buddha once said, this is the sign of a wise person: You realize that if you really want to be happy, you've got to train the mind. You see the value of training the mind. Foolish people don't see that. They feel that happiness has to come from gaining this and gaining that, that it depends on things outside being in a particular way. The wise person realizes that true happiness comes from being able to deal with whatever arises skillfully. That's the kind of training we're

working on here, learning how to be mindful, learning how to be alert, learning how to read our own minds, learning from our past mistakes. Notice, the Buddha never says never make a mistake. He says to try not to make a mistake, but if you make one, this is how you learn from it. You resolve not to repeat the mistake. You don't let yourself get tied up in remorse. Just remember the next time around that you don't want to repeat what you've done.

At the same time, you try to develop attitudes of unlimited goodwill, compassion, empathetic joy, and equanimity. Learn how to develop those attitudes for everybody. This is another inspiring theme that you might want to work on if you find you have trouble settling down in the present moment. Try to develop these attitudes so that you can call on them whenever you need them, so as to push away the limits that the mind tends to place on itself.

In this way, you develop the proper attitudes to your mistakes. You admit them but don't get tied up in remorse, realizing that getting tied up in remorse can't go back and change what was done in the past, that your duty is just to remind yourself to keep the mind in good shape so that it doesn't get in a state where it's going to make that mistake all over again. If you wound yourself with remorse, a wounded mind has trouble not repeating mistakes.

So if you're feeling any trouble in bringing the mind in the present moment, stop and ask what attitudes the mind is bringing to the present moment that make it difficult. Learn how to undo any unskillful narratives and work on developing skillful narratives that result in realizing the need to train the mind, to make it focused on the present moment, to find true happiness within. Then you realize: Here you are, ready to meditate.

It's like that story Ajaan Lee tells about, when he was a young monk, he was thinking of disrobing. He went up and sat in the chedi of the monastery in Bangkok, thinking, "Okay, if I were going to disrobe, what would happen?"

At first he created a narrative in which all kinds of good things happened. Here he is, a farm boy, but he gets to marry the daughter of a nobleman. But then reality hits. Daughters of noblemen tend to be pretty gentle creatures, frail creatures, but anyone who was going to be his wife would have to work hard and bear children. So in his narrative, the daughter of the nobleman dies, leaving him behind with a child.

He hires a wet nurse to look after the child, and after a while, he marries the wet nurse, who was good to his child for a while, but then, when she has a child of her own, things start getting difficult. He begins to realize that his salary isn't going to get any more than it is at that point. Every time he goes home, there are three different stories about what happened: the wife's version, the first child's

version, the second child's version. He thinks, "Oh my gosh, I wish I'd never disrobed." Then he reminds himself, "Hey, I haven't disrobed. I'm still a monk." So his narrative brought him back to the present moment in a much better shape.

In the same way, learn how to create your own narratives that bring you back to the present moment in a better shape, ready to meditate. As long as the mind is going to think, teach it how to think skillfully. Make your thoughts your allies as well. We talked today about having the breath as a friend, as an ally. Well, sometimes it also requires teaching your thinking to be your ally, too. It's all part of training the mind.