

## *Whatever It Takes*

*November 15, 2007*

Even here in our quiet corner, it's not always quiet. So it's good to learn how to deal with noise. I've always liked Ajaan Chah's statement that when there's noise during your meditation, it's not the case that the noise is disturbing you. You're disturbing the noise if you comment on it, if you complain about it to yourself, weaving all kinds of dialogs and narratives about how that noise shouldn't be happening.

The meaning of his comment is that you should leave the noise alone. If it's going to be there, it's going to be there. You allow it just to pass away, because that's what noise does. It comes and goes. Just make sure that your mind doesn't put up a resistant surface to it. Think of your body and your mind as wide open, like a screen on a window. The wind can blow through the screen without disturbing it because the screen doesn't catch it. The image in the Canon is of a net. Just as the net doesn't catch the wind, you don't catch the sounds. Think of your mind as not catching these things. They go past, but you can be still in the midst of that.

Years ago I was teaching a meditation session at Swarthmore. They put us in a room that had an extremely loud clock. At the end of the first session, as soon as the students opened their eyes, the first comment was, "that clock!" So I had point out to them that the clock hadn't destroyed their breath. The breath was still there. So it's simply a matter of learning how to stay focused on one thing in the midst of all the other stuff that's going on around you.

That's the art of concentration. In the Pali, it says, "secluded from sensuality," but this doesn't mean being so secluded from sense impressions that you don't hear them, or that you don't have any sense impressions at all. Sensuality here means, as the Buddha defines it in another passage, your passion for your resolves for sensual pleasures. In other words, we like having sensual intentions, we like talking about sensual stuff to ourselves. To get into concentration, you have to learn how to drop that passion. That's when you're secluded from sensuality, when you reflect on how inconstant sensual pleasures are, how untrustworthy. For the time being at least, you decide to drop any involvement with them.

That's the kind seclusion the Buddha is talking about. Now, there may still be sense impressions, and you hear them very clearly. But the trick in concentration is learning how not to get involved, just letting them pass while you maintain

contact with your object, the breath. This is how you can maintain concentration in different situations. You don't need to have just the ideal situation in order to practice.

After all, this is an ability we've already developed to some extent in our lives. You're watching a TV show, and if other things are happening in the room while you're watching the show, then if you're really absorbed in the show, you just stay with the show. The other stuff just goes right past you.

Try to develop the same level of absorption and interest in the breath, reminding yourself that there's a lot to learn here, just keeping tabs on the breath all the way through the in-breath, all the way through the out-.

Years back I happened to visit a music school in Seoul. The year prior to that, a friend of mine who learned the *kayagum* had needed a drummer. So she taught me how to play the Korean drum in order to accompany her. When I stopped off in Korea on the way back to Thailand, she'd gone back to continue her studies in Korean music, and she invited me to visit her teacher. The music school there consisted of one large room, with about 40 people practicing their instruments or their singing in little open booths around the edge of the room. It wasn't like a music school here in the States, where each musician has his or her own little private practice room. Everybody was in that one room, and as you were performing or listening to your teacher, you had to stay totally focused on what you were doing, what you were listening to, and learn how to block out everything else. Even though you could hear it, you decided not to focus on it.

That's the kind of concentration you're trying to develop. In the beginning it is easier when you don't have those distractions. But any concentration that relies on ideal circumstances is not a very reliable refuge in any way at all. For the most part, things are quiet here, but it's good to learn how to keep focused even when things are not quiet, even when there's activity. This involves learning how to accept situations and regard them as challenges.

You can call this quality humility. Humility doesn't mean that you're a bad person or that you're unworthy or anything like that. It simply means recognizing that as long as you're suffering, you still have a lot to learn. So you want to learn.

It's the desire to learn that's going to carry you through. You're willing to do what it takes. You don't set up little laws inside yourself, saying, "I'm going to learn only this kind of thing, but not things that are beneath me or too much for me to do." That's the kind of pride that gets in the way of your meditation, gets in the way of things developing. Sometimes lessons in cleaning up the monastery are good meditation lessons.

That was a lot of my training with Ajaan Fuang: learning how to mop the floor, learning how to clean his spittoon, learning how to be observant of these things without having to be told all the time—when to sweep, when not to sweep, looking at the wind, to decide whether today is a good day to sweep or not. All these little things are part of training the mind. You could focus on finding imperfections in the environment here. “How can anyone be expected to meditate when things are like this, or are like that?” That’s a kind of pride that gets in the way of your meditation. Say, “If my concentration isn’t really good, I have to learn how to stay concentrated in the midst of whatever the situation. So here’s an opportunity to learn that skill, to develop that skill.” If you find yourself not doing well with it, just remind yourself that the only way you grow is by learning how to deal with the things for which you’re not talented, that don’t come easily.

I was talking to a man trained in martial arts this past weekend. He was commenting that there are a lot of people out there who are good at certain skills in martial arts, but they have huge gaps in their repertoire, and they have too much pride to go back and learn how to fill in those gaps. It’s a common trait among all of us that we like to do the things we’re comfortable doing, the things we feel skilled at doing, the things that come fluently, but when something is awkward, we don’t like to do it, whether it’s a matter of wounded pride, or whatever. Yet if you want to be really good at the whole range of your skills, you have to learn how to do things that you’re not good at, be willing to repeat them a hundred times with the awareness that maybe for those first times, it’s not going to come well yet at all, but you’ve got to keep doing it again and again. If you don’t do it, it’s never going to get developed, never going to be mastered.

So, on the one hand there’s the humility that admits that this is a skill you’ve got to learn, combined with the self-esteem that says, “Well, yes, I can do this if I really apply myself to it”—in other words, the ability to talk yourself into sticking with things, and having the confidence that with enough time and enough observation, you’re going to learn how to do it well, or at least do it better than you’ve done it before.

So again, humility doesn’t mean a low self-esteem. It means looking at the situation realistically. As long as there’s suffering, there’s work to be done. And you want to be willing to do whatever it takes.