

Pride in Your Craft

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Everything we do is for the sake of happiness, to get away from pain, stress, and suffering. And yet so often the things we do *cause* pain and suffering. This is why we have to train the mind, to look more carefully at what it's doing. Everybody everywhere tries to figure why there's pain and suffering and how to get rid of it, but for the most part we tend to look outside for the causes. We think we're suffering because of what this person did or that person said, because the weather is too hot or too cold, we don't have enough of this kind of food or that kind of shelter. And it goes on and on and on. Our society encourages us to look outside for the causes of suffering and for the solution to that suffering.

And there's something inside us that's willing to go along, because we don't like to look at our own mistakes. It's one thing to act out of total ignorance, having no idea at all at what we're doing and how it might cause suffering, but sometimes we start doing certain things that we know will lead to suffering and stress, and yet we continue to do them. We don't like to look at those decisions at all, which makes it hard for us to really dig down and see that the causes of pain and suffering are coming from inside.

So it takes a while to internalize the message. We put up resistance. This is why the Buddha not only has to teach us something that goes against our normal understanding of things, but he also has to overcome our resistance to wanting to understand in a new way, to turn around and look at ourselves. Part of his teaching is to remind us that this is the way everybody acts. It's not just you. And at the same time, he encourages us to develop good strong concentration so that the mind will be in a better place to actually look at what it's doing, from a slight distance, from a better perspective.

When you've gotten some experience in finding these sources for happiness inside—so that you realize you're not a total miserable failure—then you can start looking at areas in which you've been less skillful, and see them not so much as a judgment on your character but simply as an area where your skill hasn't yet extended. That way the issue becomes more of a challenge and less of a dreaded judgment.

So as we meditate, we focus first on what we can do in the present moment to make things better. This is why the breath-meditation method of Ajaan Lee taught focuses on breathing in a comfortable way. At the same time, you learn from what you're doing. You can observe your breath and you can learn from

uncomfortable breathing. Fortunately, there's no moral stigma attached to the fact you've been breathing in an uncomfortable way. It's simply a practical issue you haven't been paying attention to. But if you pay attention, you can start seeing what kind of breathing genuinely does feel good now. It's going to take a while to get really skilled at this, because sometimes a certainly way of breathing that feels cool right now is actually not all that good for you. You learn that over time. As you keep watching, keep observing, and develop a willingness to keep learning, you find that you get better and better at it.

Once you have a sense of confidence here, then it's easier to start looking in other areas of your life where you've been less than skillful and now you can approach them with more confidence. You may have made mistakes in the past but you can make changes in the future. You can make changes right now. That's the attitude you want to bring to all areas of your life.

For instance, you'll notice when you leave the monastery that the first couple of days things are going really well and then they start falling apart. On the one hand, you don't tell yourself that it's just a natural occurrence that you just have to accept. On the other hand, you don't blame yourself, because that doesn't accomplish anything. You have the attitude of: "Let's see exactly where it starts to slip apart. Where does that first thread begin to unravel? And how does it connect to the next thread, and then the next time? Maybe I can be more careful about that first thread the next time around."

The practice falls apart especially easy when you're living out in this land of wrong view, where people tend to be careless about the way they look at things, listen to things, and allow their minds to give rise to greed, aversion, and delusion. It's very easy for you to go along with the general trend. But there is no safety in numbers. Just because lots of people are doing it doesn't mean that it's safe—or that it's wise.

This is where it's useful to develop your identity as a meditator, in line with the instruction Ven. Ananda once gave to a nun, saying that conceit is something we eventually want to overcome, but it's something that we can use on the path. It gets a start when we see what other people can gain awakening. You can say, "Well, they're people. I'm a person. They can do it. Why can't I?" And it's also useful in developing a quality whose name we don't like to hear: a sense of shame. If you're going to be meditator, there are certain things you should be ashamed to do. This is not shame in the sense of saying that you're a bad person, simply the realization that a particular way of being careless or a particular way of giving in to your defilements is something that should be beneath you. It's the shame that comes with a high sense of self-esteem.

So a certain pride around the fact that you're practicing, that you're training the mind, can be a useful thing. As can the pride of the accomplishment that you've learned this much in the meditation, you've developed these many skills, so you don't want to let them get washed away by the tides of your old habits—or by the general tides that surround you when you're not here at the monastery, where you're not practicing with a group of people who are also practicing.

You need a certain sense of your own distinctiveness. You are a meditator. You are someone who's trying to understand the causes of suffering. And it's good to take confidence in that fact and have a little pride, not in a sense of thinking that you're better than other people, but simply taking pride in your accomplishments, pride in your skills, and the fact that they're developing. Now that you've learned how to behave in a skillful way, you don't want to throw that knowledge away. If you feel uncomfortable about developing a sense of pride, at least have respect for the skills that you've learned.

In Thailand, they say to think about your teacher. What would your teacher say if he or she saw you slipping up? This way you begin to internalize your teacher. Of course, this doesn't mean taking on everything he says or does without thinking. You've thought it through and you realize: "This really is helpful to me. My teacher has been compassionate to me. Why can't I be compassionate to myself and do what I know is the wise thing?" In this way, you build up a bank of arguments to use against your old defilements, your old ways.

What this comes down to is that whatever works, you put it to use. After a while, you find certain ways of thinking or certain ways of arguing with yourself don't work anymore, and are actually getting in the way, so you put them aside.

So just because a particular attitude is not totally enlightened doesn't mean that it can't work. Remember, we are on a path here, and there are stages in the path. We're not here to clone awakening, to pretend we're awakened people, or to follow what someone once called the "practice of being already awakened." Because if we were following that practice, it'd be just guesswork. What would an awakened person say now? Well, we're not so sure. But we act in what seems to embody the most awakened course and then see if we can learn: Was it a mistake? Was it not a mistake?

An important lesson in the practice is that even though you should have pride as a craftsperson, the pride of a craftsperson isn't a matter of pretending that you did something right when it wasn't. The pride of a craftsperson is a willingness to recognize a mistake, to recognize a failing in your skill, and to want to close up that gap. That's a useful form of pride.

So we work on getting the mind to settle down and make that a skill. Then when you've got the confidence of being a skillful in one area, you try to extend that skill to cover other areas of life as well. That's how the practice grows. This is especially true as you get deeper in the concentration. The mind that's still is the mind that can see clearly what's working and what's not. And it has a clear idea of what it means to "work" because you're getting more and more sensitive to the movements of the mind and also to the different levels of stress in the mind. You begin to see that there are fluctuations in the level of stress and that they're connected to things that you're actually doing.

This is how people go from one level of jhana, say, to another level. They begin to see that what originally was the greatest level of stillness they'd ever attained still has some fluctuations, still has some drawbacks. So you've got to ask yourself, "What am I doing? How am I approaching the breath, how am I relating to the breath in a way that's causing that fluctuation, causing that stress?" And the mind will move to a different level once you see, "Oh, it's this. I'm doing this," and you let go of it, i.e., you stop doing it.

Sometimes it's something that you needed to do in order to get the mind into concentration, but the skills you need to get the mind in the concentration and the skills to keep it in concentration are slightly different. In the beginning, you're fighting off all kinds of distractions. Then, as those distractions fall away, some of the tension that was needed to get you in concentration, to help you have a very clear line that "You've got to stay right here, you can't go outside this line, if you go outside of this line, you're going to get in trouble": That tension becomes unnecessary, and actually an obstacle to greater stillness. As the concentration gets stronger, you don't need that level protection.

Ajaan Fuang's analogy was of pouring cement. When you first pour cement, you need the forms. If you take away the forms before the cement has hardened, it flows out all over the place. There comes a point, though, when the cement is hard enough that you can take the form off, and the cement stays where it is.

So it's in this process of trying to get the mind as still as possible that you actually develop discernment into what the mind is doing, where it's causing stress, and how you can observe the stress arising and falling away. That way you comprehend it, to see where it's coming from and then you can just abandon whatever's causing it. As you do this, you're getting practice in the four noble truths, regardless of whether it's the first jhana or the second jhana, or the 1½ jhana, or however jhanas there may be.

If you develop this attitude, it doesn't really matter what level of concentration you've attained, you can learn from it. And that's a sign of a person with real

discernment. Ajaan Lee's comment was that a person with discernment is someone who can take whatever they've got and get good use out of it. And so you take the level of concentration you've got now and try learn from it. Try to become more skillful in how you approach it. And then you try to take that attitude of wanting to be skillful and you expand its range, using the power of concentration to develop it, to give yourself a sense of well-being that makes it easier to stick with that intention. And the confidence that comes from concentration helps you stick with that intention as well.

Then try to make it more and more your common way of functioning, so that when you catch yourself being unskillful, you don't beat yourself up. You simply notice the fact and tell yourself, "Okay, I've got to shift my attitude. I'm doing something wrong here." Remember those duties for the four noble truths. If you're making mistakes, it's probably because you're abandoning the path or you're trying to abandon the stress. But you can't do that. You've got to straighten out your perceptions: "What are the duties I've got to do right now? What am I faced with right now? And which duty is appropriate right here?" If you're unclear about what's happening, try to see if you can comprehend: "Where is the stress right now?" And develop whatever mindfulness and continuity of awareness is needed so that you can really see it.

When you see the stress, look and see what else is coming around with the stress—in other words, whatever arises at the same time the stress does and passes away at the same time the stress pass away. There will be times in the practice where it seems like all the different duties in the four noble truths are functioning together in a seamless way. But when things break down, that's when you've got to stop and say, "Okay, where have I missed the categories of four noble truths and which duties am I misapplying?"

It's like driving a car. As long as the car is functioning will, you don't have to think too much about what's going on in the engine. But when it starts malfunctioning, that's when you have to start thinking about it, trying to figure out whether it's the battery or the sparkplug or whatever. That's when you have to analyze it. But when it's functioning smoothly, you just keep making sure the car is headed in the direction you want to go. You're running it properly and all the parts work together.

It's in this way that in internalizing your teacher you become your own teacher. You get more confident. You get more capable. You get more competent. You find that you can rely on yourself more and more in any situation to do the skillful thing.