

## *Truthful & Observant*

*July 4, 2009*

One of the Thai idioms for meditation is “making an effort,” and of course it means making an effort with the mind. There’s the physical effort to do walking meditation, the effort that goes through sitting long periods of time and dealing with the pain that comes up when you sit for long periods of time. But primarily it’s an effort with the mind, to gain some control over this very changeable mind we have.

There’s one passage where the Buddha talks about the mind shifting around quickly like a fish out of water, flipping and flopping around. There’s another passage where he says the mind is so quick to change that there’s no real analogy for it—and the Buddha was a master of analogies. So this mind can change very easily. You think you’ve got it headed in one direction, and all of a sudden it’s going off in some other direction. By the time you’ve figured out which other direction it’s going, it’s changed directions again.

So you’ve got to find some way of getting hold of the mind. As Ajaan Thate once said, you can’t tie it down with chains. You’ve got to give it a foundation. You’ve got to have a place where you take refuge, so that you can have a good solid basis for its actions.

This is why, when the Buddha set forth the pattern going forth, it’s simply the act of taking refuge. You go to the Buddha for refuge, the Dhamma for refuge, the Sangha refuge. Three times you say that. Three times. In one sense, it does mean that you take your strength from things outside, the example the Buddha. If we didn’t have the example of someone who could find true happiness through his own efforts, it’d be very daunting prospect to look for true happiness on our own. We wouldn’t know where to look, or whether it would succeed.

You think about the Buddha. He didn’t any guarantees when he went out, you know, that he would find what he was looking for. We have at least the example of the Buddha and the Sangha, that there are people who claim that true happiness can be found through your own efforts. And they’re happy to show the way.

And we have the Dhamma, which explains things, gives directions to our practice. So that’s one source of strength in our effort. We have good examples who have left a very detailed path. And even though we talk about the path as one that you tread yourself, you still depend a lot on other people. As you notice, there wasn’t just one person in the ordination hall today. There was a whole

community, the community of the monks who are accepting the new candidate, and a community of lay people, giving their support, promising their support in the future. After all, we are social animals. We do depend on other people. We do depend on one another for the support of good examples, and for material support. All this is an important part of the practice. It takes a community for people to practice.

But given that support, it's up to each of us to make the most of it, to put it to good use. As the Buddha said, one of the motivations for going as far as you can in the practice is the realization that the greater your attainments, the more awards accrue to the people who've been supporting you. It's not just you who benefits. The people who've supported you benefit as well. This goes for all of us, lay or ordained. We depend on the support of others to make progress in the practice. But when it comes to the actual doing, it's our own affair. After all, we suffer from our own lack of skill, and we have to develop skill through our own powers of observation.

As the Buddha said, "Let someone who is truthful and observant come, someone who's no deceiver, and I'll teach that person the Dhamma." Those are the two requisites. One the one hand, you're truthful and not deceptive. It means you're truthful to yourself. When you make a mistake, you admit you made a mistake. And you're truthful to the people you live with.

On the other hand, you have to be observant. As Ajaan Fuang said when I went back to stay with him, "Don't expect everything to be handed to you. If you're going to practice, you have to learn how to think like a thief. Look around. Use your eyes. Notice the examples of others. Sometimes they're good examples, sometimes they are not. But pay attention. Because it's through developing your own powers of observation that you see not only things outside, but things inside yourself."

Everything you need to know is already displaying itself all the time. Your greed is displaying itself. Your anger. Your delusion is displaying itself. You just don't notice. You don't see these things for what they are. There's an open story going on, but we're hiding from the story. We're refusing to see it because our attention is elsewhere.

So you've got to turn around and look at what you're doing, look at the results of what you're doing. Be as observant as possible. We make the mind quiet so that we can be observant. We practice the precepts, we're generous, so that we can be observant. Notice what happens to the mind when you're not generous. Notice what happens when you *are* generous. The more generous you can be, the more

observant the mind can be of its greed, of its aversion, of its fears. The more virtuous you are, the more you notice.

Years back, I had a lay student with whom I was very strict with regard to little white lies. I told him, “You want to make sure that everything you say is true, even the things that you think are not deceptive—in other words, the things you say in jest. Those things lower the value of your speech.” At first he resisted this training, but he was willing to give it a try. He became very careful so that not even for the sake of a joke would he say an exaggeration or something that wasn’t really true. It became a habit.

A year or so later, we were visiting a lay Dhamma teacher someplace else, and the Dhamma teacher started going off on a riff. My student noticed that because he’d been doing this training, the riff—which was a lot of exaggeration, fooling around—really seemed jarring.

The more precise you are in your behavior, the more you see, especially when you meditate and get the mind still, so that even the slightest movement of the mind shows itself to your awareness. That’s when you really see where you’re causing stress, and where you don’t have to, and where the alternatives are. Are there ways of acting, thinking, speaking that cause less harm, that are less burdensome to yourself and other people? You notice it. You see. Even though that sort of thing has been happening all long, all of a sudden you see it as if for the first time.

This is why in the forest tradition the training is very meticulous. In the case of Ajaan Fuang, there were a lot of times he wouldn’t explain things. You had to figure them out for yourself because he wanted you to get used to being as observant as you could. Then you would take that habit and apply it to your meditation.

This is why the path is both gradual and sudden—gradual in the sense that it takes time to become more observant, but sudden in the sense that when you see something, it’s not as if you had to dig down deep into something far away. It’s something that’s been right here all along. When your powers of observation are up for it, you see immediately. That’s the suddenness of the path.

Your ability to be observant is what gives a lot of power to your practice as well. Ajaan Fuang noted one time that when your views are wrong, everything is wrong. You keep pushing and pushing and pushing, all in the wrong direction, and nothing seems to work. But when you notice, “Oh. This is connected to that. I do this, and this is the suffering that comes as a result,” you let go immediately. You don’t even have to tell the mind. It sees the cause and sees the effect and sees

how they are connected. That connection is something you don't want, and you see you have an alternative.

When you observe that fact, when your powers of observation are up for it, there's no way you're going to hold on.

This is why being observant is such an important aspect of right effort. As with any skill, it's not just a matter of the hours or the amount of effort you throw into the practice, it's the powers of your observation that make all the difference. You watch what you're doing again and again and again, until you detect something you didn't see before, something subtle but there, right there, not far away at all. All of the sudden, the phrase—say, you're playing the piano—becomes a lot easier, a lot more expressive. Your stroke as a swimmer gets more efficient. Because you're observant.

So these are the two qualities that have to be brought to the path: one, be very truthful, both to yourself and other people; and, two, be observant. Those are the two qualities that make for progress.