

Step Back & Watch

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I've told this story before. The last time I went to see Ajaan Suwat, he mentioned that his brain was sending him all sorts of strange perceptions. And that, basically, was one of the differences between him and my father. When my father approached death, he suffered from Parkinson's and then it developed into Parkinson's dementia. In his case, he couldn't tell that his brain was sending him strange perceptions. He believed them. He was *in* them. When he saw a black dog coming into the living room, it was a black dog in the living room. No two ways about it. There were people committing suicide outside. That's what he saw. That's what he sensed. Because he sensed it, that's the way it was.

But with Ajaan Suwat, he had trained his mind to step back from his thoughts, to step back from his thought worlds. And that's what saved him from a lot of suffering.

This is one of the reasons why we develop mindfulness, why we practice concentration: to keep in mind the possibility that sometimes our perceptions are off.

The concentration gives us a place to step back, so that we can examine things, to watch the perception as it comes, to watch it as it goes, and to ask ourselves: Which of our different sets of colored glasses have we been wearing? The greed glasses? The ill will glasses? The drowsiness glasses? Restless and anxiety, uncertainty, all these are different glasses that we can wear at any one time: They distort our vision, and then, starting from distorted visions, we act in distorted ways, and end up suffering because of the distortion.

The Canon describes the different hindrances as different kinds of water. Sensual desire is water with dye in it, in which you see something as desirable. The object is just there, neither desirable nor not desirable, but as soon as it's tinged with that sense of desirability, it looks glamorous, it looks enticing. That's how it's colored.

Ill will is like boiling water. You can't see anything clearly at all. If you try to look at your reflection in boiling water, it's all scattered and broken up.

Sloth and drowsiness is like water that's been covered with algae.

Restlessness and anxiety is like water with wind blowing over it. And uncertainty is water kept in a dark place. None of these forms of water are good for looking at your face—and they're not good for looking at anything at all, because they distort what you see through them.

This is why we need concentration as a place to step back, so that we're not caught up in what we thought we saw. We actually saw it, but then it was seen through distorted glasses, reflected in water that really can't give a true reflection.

So this is one of the reasons why we develop concentration: It's a safe place to stay. When your mind is not clouded or obscured by any of these hindrances, you've got a better chance of looking at that process of perception that told you that this thing was desirable, that person was someone you really want to see suffer, and so on down the line. There's no guarantee, of course, that concentration will give you one hundred percent true vision of everything. Even the insights you gain from concentration have to be tested. But you're in a much better position when your mind is still, and when you have this as a place you can tap into at any time. Even people practicing advanced stages of concentration have to use this as a place where they step back whenever insights arise.

There's the story of Ajaan Maha Boowa thinking about the teachings he had learned from Ajaan Mun. Ajaan Mun had just passed away, and Ajaan Maha Boowa felt lost, bereft of a teacher. He said it was as if he had been depending on a doctor, and now the doctor was gone. He was going to be a wild animal in the forest with no doctor to look after him at all. But then he realized: "What was it that Ajaan Mun taught? Take that as your teacher in his absence." And one of the lessons that came to him at that point was, "Whatever comes up in the mind that you're not one hundred percent sure about, just stay with the sense of the knower, just basic awareness, and whatever that knowledge is, it'll pass."

In its passing you may gain a sense of how reliable it might have been. Or at the very least you're safe. Because there are a lot of things that can come up in the practice that can be dangerous.

Think about the Buddha at the night of his awakening. Those first two knowledges were dangerous. The knowledge of his previous lifetimes: He could have gotten all absorbed in the fact that now he suddenly knew something he hadn't known before. He had seen a truth, that death is not the end, that one life leads to another, to another, to another.

There are stories in the Canon of people who gain this much insight and set themselves up as teachers. But the Buddha's question was, "What's the best use to make of this kind of knowledge? And what are the questions that arise on seeing this kind of knowledge?" One of the questions that occurred to him was, "Does this happen only to me? What's the pattern behind all this moving around from one birth to the next, to the next?" And so in the second knowledge of the night he saw beings of the world, falling and reappearing, i.e., dying and taking rebirth.

Here again he could have fallen for this knowledge. I know people in Thailand who've gained knowledge of this sort and they set themselves up as fortune tellers. They go around giving advice to people whose relatives have just died. What usually happens is that their knowledge begins to deteriorate. And there they are: They've set themselves up in this business and all of a sudden the source of their knowledge has disappeared. There are very few people who are honest enough to stop engaging in this business when this happens. Most people just start going with whatever impulse comes into the mind, whatever picture comes in the mind, thinking that it must be true.

But the Buddha saw that that was not the best use of that knowledge. What's important about the knowledge of seeing beings dying and being reborn was what determines the good rebirth, what determines unfortunate rebirth. It was their actions: the extent to which they listened to noble persons, developed right view, and acted on right view.

So that inspired him with a further question: "What's the best use of this knowledge?" That second knowledge pointed to intention as the important factor that determines what happens to people. What if you looked at your intention in the present moment and developed the kind of view that would allow you to put an end to all of this dying and being reborn?

These are some of the questions the Buddha asked, and these are the questions that kept him from falling into the dangers of those different kinds of knowledges.

So as you can see, there are dangers all along the path, starting with your hindrances and your really gross defilements. Then you get the mind concentrated so that you can pull out of the gross defilements, like the hindrances, but then these other, subtler problems come up.

But if you keep this basic principle in mind, you can be safe: One, find a still place to just watch these things coming and going. And then, two, ask

yourself: What's the best use of this knowledge? Because even if you don't attain psychic powers through the meditation, there are still a lot of false assumptions you can fall into. As the mind reaches deeper and deeper levels of concentration and starts experiencing the infinity of space or the infinity of consciousness, it's easy to come to the conclusion that you've reached the Ground of Being, that you've hit some metaphysical absolute.

This is where the Buddha's questions are important. What are you *doing* to experience this? As you make the mind very quiet, you watch to see what exactly the doing is, because only when things are very, very still can you see these subtle levels of action in the mind. You can see whatever comes up as a kind of fabrication.

So you try to put yourself in the stillest spot possible to sense that kind of fabrication and to keep that question in mind: What are you doing here that maintains this?

Sometimes you hear the teaching that, as you meditate, you shouldn't *do* anything, you should just *be*. The being is getting into concentration. The doing that most people are involved in is doing involved with the hindrances, doing involved with the different defilements. So you learn to just *be* in the concentration. Just be one with the breath. Be one with the sense of space. Be one with the awareness. Be the knowing.

But that's a state of becoming. It's a skillful state of becoming, it's necessary as part of the practice, but you don't want to fall for the assumptions that go along with that state of becoming. You want to be able to step back from those as well.

So develop the stillness of the observer that holds that question in mind: "What's going on here?" And don't fully believing any assumptions that you've taken up. That's what enables you to get past the pitfalls of the practice.

It's the same principle all the way through, but it's easy to forget. You get past your first line of problems and at last you arrive at concentration. And you go, "Ah, this is it! I'm finally in touch with my true nature that I can trust." But the Buddha says No: You've got to watch that as well. That assumption about true nature, the assumption about just being instead of doing: Those assumptions can obscure a lot of things.

So maintain that initial wariness that tells you not to trust everything that the mind tells you. You start with obvious defilements—and sometimes they're not so obvious. For everybody, it's a question of learning to see things that should be obvious but haven't been. Something's been

obscuring them. It's like those old Zen stories. You stand outside a Zen story and of course what the teacher has to say is true. And of course the student should have understood it. But the student was *in* the situation, buried in the defilement, which meant that he couldn't see. And the teacher had to shock him out of that state to let him see what was going on.

In this case, you're allowed to use your concentration as the place where you can go to get out of whatever your defilement is. If you have to depend on a Zen master to hit you every time you had a defilement, you're never going to get anywhere in your practice. You have to learn how to whack yourself upside the head. In other words, catch yourself in the course of falling into something unskillful and ask, "Is this really where you want to go?" A good part of the mind will say, "Yes, this is what I want. This is why I was seeing things in this way to begin with. I wanted desire. I wanted ill will."

And you've got to have the mindfulness and concentration and discernment to resist that, pull out of it, question it. When you've learned how to depend on your concentration, then you have to learn that there are some subtle things here in the concentration that you've got to question as well.

So this ability to place a question mark next to things, and to watch until you can answer that question mark: This is an essential part of the path. Because everything the Buddha teaches is about *doing*. The language is simply there to help you to master the skills. It's not for just sitting around and figuring out, "What's the greatest concept? What would a great concept be? Dualism? Or would a greater concept be non-dualism? Or how about thinking about going beyond concepts?" For the Buddha, the path wasn't just abstract thinking. Things like infinite space, infinite consciousness, sound like abstractions, but they're actually labels you apply as you're developing your skills. The labels that are needed to get you to particular states of mind and to recognize where you are.

So keep on reminding yourself that whatever the vocabulary here, it's the vocabulary of someone who's learning a skill. As when you're learning how to play the violin: There's the spun sound, there's the dark sound. You learn the vocabulary so that you can create the qualities of sound that you're looking for.

You're learning the vocabulary of the Buddha's teachings as part of the skills that you're supposed to master. It's only when you've mastered the skills that you can put the words down.

You might think about the ideal, you can get to a level of abstraction and say, “Okay, let’s just go beyond the abstraction, beyond the duality, beyond the conceptualizing. That must be a higher thing.”

Conceptually, it may sound nice but it has very little to do with what you’re actually doing in your mind. It’s all distraction. You want to be able to question where the mind is right now. Then you use whatever level of vocabulary is appropriate for where you are right now. If you’re having trouble getting the mind concentrated, you’re going to be interested in the hindrances. Once it’s concentrated, you’re going to be interested in navigating the different levels of concentration. You’re going to be interested in learning how to navigate the subtle defilements that build up around concentration. But in every case, it’s a matter of learning how to get the mind as still as possible and watch, with that little question mark in the background.

So that you don’t fall for these things.

So that the mind becomes its own best friend.