

Being Your Own Teacher

September 14, 2011

Ajaan Fuang talked about how you have to be your own teacher as you meditate and as you practice in general. You have to be your own parent. If you had unskillful parents, you have to learn the role of how to be a healthy parent: a parent concerned for the child's welfare, a parent with firm principles—and a very watchful one because, after all, your outside teachers can't be watching after you all the time.

Even if you have a teacher who can read your mind, he can't spend all his time reading your mind. You're the one listening to your mind all the time. You're the one making the decisions, so you're in the best position to watch what's going on, to figure out what's skillful, what's not, and how to change it. The problem is that you tend to abdicate that position. And who knows who's coming in to take it over?

So you have to be very clear. You're the teacher; you're the parent. And what is this child of yours doing? You've got to set out tasks—wise tasks. I was reading recently a complaint that there's a lot of homework being assigned in America to show that the teachers are really keeping their students active. But much of it is just make-work. It uses up a lot of energy but it doesn't necessarily teach the child anything. You don't want to be that kind of teacher.

You want to be the kind of teacher who assigns good projects: projects that make you grow. Make up your mind you're going to meditate half an hour every day. Then learn how to stretch it from a half-hour to 35 minutes, 40 minutes. Keep working up, working up. And of course, it's not just a question of the quantity of the meditation, but also the quality. While you're here with the breath, how observant are you of how the breath is going, or how the mind begins to wander off away from the breath? Can you catch it before it goes? Can you learn how to read the signs? Do you have any techniques for bringing it right back? That's a really useful exercise.

Another useful exercise is learning to go through the body in very great detail, noticing how the breathing process affects all the different parts of the body, even down to the little joints in your fingers and your toes. To what extent do the different parts of your body get nourished by the breath? Can you figure out which parts get starved? For a lot of us, the brain gets starved. You'll find that there's a way you can focus on the brain so that it seems like the brain can just take

all the energy you want to give it. You can have really good, long, deep in-breaths into the brain, so allow that part of the body to get nourished as well.

Explore the needs of all the different parts of the body. Make that another one of your homework exercises. See how long you can stay with the breath and not lose your focus. If you do lose your focus, see how quickly you can come back. And learn which of these exercises the mind enjoys the most so that when one of them starts getting dry and the practice as a whole starts getting dry, you can switch to the exercises you enjoy. In other words, recess here isn't totally recess. You're not just allowing the mind to run around and do as it likes. You give it something really useful to do that it enjoys. In that way, it gains the sense of freedom, the sense of refreshment that can come from the practice. Then get back to some of the more difficult work.

You've got to monitor how the practice is going—and you've got to stay there in the classroom while the students are working, because otherwise the bullies will gang up on the weaker kids. The lazier ones will just start fooling around. This is what mindfulness and alertness are for: to keep watch over the mind, to realize what it needs to do in order to stay on the path, and then to keep it there.

So realize your responsibility here. Even though you may want to listen to the Dhamma, read the Dhamma, ask questions, and get answers, those are aids and assistance on the outside. The real work has to be done inside.

Even the Buddha could only point the way and give encouragement, but each of his disciples had to do the work for him or herself. And it's the same with you. You've got to be your own teacher. There's no way that anyone else can get into your mind. When you were a child, you were very susceptible. But even then you had your filter. You may have noticed that you can have two children living in the same house and yet they pick up very different messages from their parents. As they get older, their filters tend to be more tightly woven. So it's possible that you can listen to a Dhamma talk and totally miss the message—or come out with a very different one.

Years back, I was teaching at Cambridge Insight. That was back in the days when I had only a few Dhamma talks for groups of people that I wasn't really familiar with. One year, I'd forgotten which of the talks I'd given the year before and I was afraid I was going to give the same talk over again. Just as we were walking into the room and I was about to give the talk, the person who had recorded the previous year's talk turned to me and said, "You know, I really appreciated what you had to say last year. It's stuck with me all this time." Then she made a statement, which supposedly I'd said last year, and I knew that I would never have said anything like that. I realized that it wouldn't matter even if I did

repeat last year's talk. People remember what they want to remember. Even if they don't hear what they want to hear, they hear it. We all have this tendency. There's a filter that prevents other people from getting into our brain and sorting it out, so we have to examine our filters.

Again, we have to take responsibility for the Dhamma we hear, the Dhamma we understand, and the Dhamma we apply. That all has to be put to the test. If you try somebody's instruction and it doesn't work, you have to ask yourself, "Did I really hear the instruction rightly?" If the person isn't around to check, you say, "Well, whether I heard it or not, it's not working. Let's try something else." It's in this way that your discernment grows. It's not just a matter of being told what to do, then following the instructions, and hoping that the teacher can take total responsibility.

Remember the Buddha's example of the person giving instructions on how to go to Rājagaha. You can give very specific and very precise directions, and yet there are people who will wander away and go off someplace else. The outside teacher isn't totally responsible. It's the inside teacher who bears ultimate responsibility for figuring out why you're suffering, what can be done about it, learning to get better and better at detecting even the subtlest levels of stress, and being willing to listen to some of the teachings that may strike you as most foreign.

I've noticed over the years that when I teach in various places, the teaching that sets most people off is the teaching on rebirth. They regard it as totally irrelevant, but it's not. You're making decisions about what to do all the time based on how you calculate what the results of those decisions are going to be. If your calculation includes only this one lifetime, you're really going to limit your sense of where the dangers are in the mind—what an act of desire or an act of attachment might do—which means that you end up with a lot of things in the mind that don't get probed, don't get investigated because they seem perfectly innocuous or perfectly fine.

You get a nice state of equanimity and you feel it's going to take care of you. But as the Buddha points out, you can get stuck on equanimity. It leads to a long rebirth in a nice place, but even those nice places are places you'll ultimately have to leave. When you leave them, the number of people who go on to other nice places is like a tiny bit of dust under your fingernail, whereas the number of people who fall into the realms of deprivation are like the whole Earth. So even equanimity has its dangers as something you have to probe into.

If you keep the perspective of rebirth in mind, on the one hand it reminds you of the dangers that are right here, and you can't be complacent about any little

thing that's happening in the mind. But on the other hand, it reminds you that whatever effort you put in is not wasted. Even if your life were to end tonight, the fact that you're on this trajectory keeps you going the right direction. It's not all wiped out by the fact of death.

So learn to look at your filter to see what it's filtering out in terms of the Dhamma. Make the best use of what you've learned and what you can understand. And through the practice, you develop what the Buddha calls *bhavanamaya-pañña*—the discernment that comes from actually developing qualities in the mind.

You can hear things and you can think them through. That gives you one level of discernment. But the real discernment that's going to cut through your defilements has to come from putting the teachings into practice, being your own inner teacher, and holding all the little students in your classroom to really high standards.