

Riding an Elephant to Catch Grasshoppers

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The Thais have an expression, “riding an elephant to catch grasshoppers.” It’s a good image to hold in mind when you find yourself obsessed with minor things, things that are less important than the practice — and “minor things” here may in the eyes of the world seem major, but you remember from the point of view of training the mind to put an end to suffering, a lot of our concerns really are minor.

Yet we lose sight of that fact. So we have to keep reminding ourselves of that passage that we chant regularly: “One who is ardent with respect for concentration.” The mind when it’s still, the mind when it’s not constantly busying itself with little things, has a lot more value than we often think. For us, it sometimes seems like a big empty space. We go to all this trouble to clean out the space, and then there’s another part of the mind that says “Hey, here’s storage space. I now have the time to think about this, the time to think about that, and stash away all my thoughts.”

When you have whole days to practice, it’s all too easy to fill them up with little things, and the fact that they’re filled up doesn’t mean that they’re of high value. The fact that the mind can be empty and quiet doesn’t mean that it has no value. After all, the quiet mind is what allows you to see yourself, to understand yourself. That’s the best thing a mind can do.

There are so many things in the world that we can never really know, that we know only by inference. As the Buddha said, we can know by inference, we can know by what fits in with our current views, we can know by logic, we can know by trusting some authority, but none of that counts as real knowledge. Real knowledge is the mind knowing itself. What you do is what you know best, and all too often for us that’s an area totally obscured because we’re focused someplace else.

We clean out the mind so that we can watch it. Nothing much may be happening, but that means that when something little does happen, you’re going to see it, if you keep your proper frame of reference. But if you cleanse the mind like this, open the mind, enlarge the mind like this, don’t allow yourself to get obsessed with unimportant things. Think of the person riding the elephant to catch grasshoppers. You’ve got a mind that has a lot of value. The more you practice, the more you appreciate its value. If you don’t practice, there’s nothing much there: just a lot of greed, aversion, and delusion, nothing very impressive. But when you clean those things out, you find that the mind is capable of a lot,

and you don't want to waste it on little day-to-day concerns. So remember, the state of your mind is the most important thing in your life. You want to protect it as best you can.

When the Buddha talked about the various types of loss that are important and unimportant, he listed loss of relatives, loss of wealth, loss of health as unimportant. The world thinks of those as fairly large issues. But, as he said, you don't have to go to hell because of those kinds of loss. However, you *can* very easily go to hell through losing your right view and losing your virtue.

You may wonder why he doesn't include concentration in the list. It may be because virtue and right view are the foundations for right mindfulness. Right mindfulness, of course, is how you get the mind in concentration. So once you've got the foundations, you've got the rest of the building as well.

Your right view keeps you focused here inside: What is the mind doing? This is where real knowledge is, watching the actions of the mind, and learning how to overcome our denial about what you're doing, your ways of obscuring to ourselves what you're doing. That's the most important thing you can do, because if you can't know your own self, what are you going to know?

So have a sense of the mind's true worth—and the worth of an alert mind, a clear mind. As for the stories of the world, leave them as stories. Pick them up only when they're skillful—in other words, when they're helpful for directing yourself back to watching the mind.

Think of the Buddha on the night of his awakening. His knowledge fell into three modes. The first mode was the narrative mode, the mode of stories: thinking back all of his many lifetimes: how he'd been born this way, born that way, with this appearance, that appearance, eating this kind of food, that kind of food, having this experience of pleasure and pain, and then dying, and going through it all over again, being reborn with this appearance, this name, these pleasures, those pains, eating this kind of food.

It's interesting, the emphasis on food. That's one of the things that keep us going from one life to the next, and it's a big part of the story. Yet once you've eaten some food, what is it? It goes through your system, you absorb some of it, and rest you expel. Then you go looking for some more and some more. There's never enough. But notice that the mode of the knowledge in that first knowledge was the mode of narratives: who did what to him, what he did, and what happened next.

The mode of the second knowledge was of a worldview, seeing all the beings in the world. And when you see a large worldview like that, you can look for patterns. The pattern he saw was the pattern of skillful action versus unskillful

action. Actions were basically intentions informed by views, depending on who you listen to, who you respect. Based on what they teach you, you take on some views, and you act on those views. But you don't really know for sure. This is the scary part of going through life. We base so many of our decisions on things that we don't really know. We reason them out, make the best guess that we can, and follow through. That determines a wide range of pleasures and pains.

So the worldview sees patterns, but seeing the worldview was not the solution. The solution, the Buddha found, lay in turning around and looking inside his mind, seeing what the mind was doing: What views was it using? What intentions was it acting on? What intentions could be used to put an end to suffering? In this mode, there are no stories, there's no worldview, there are simply actions and results. And it was getting down to this mode that the Buddha was able to solve his problems.

Now, with the other two modes, the way he used them helped to focus him here. But the solution was in looking at things as events, right here right now, the actions of the mind. That's the best thing the mind can do, because it can use that knowledge to find something that the mind doesn't do—in other words something unfabricated.

So when you're sitting here meditating and suddenly find yourself tied up in stories or worldviews, remind yourself: You've got to get out of those stories, out of those worldviews, back into watching events here in the present moment. Now, whatever way you can point the story or point the worldview in this direction, that's fine. Sometimes you can just drop the stories, other times you have to remind yourself, "Okay, someone mistreated me, and it was awful, but I was able to rise above that, and become a meditator. What do meditators do? They focus on their minds."

The same with your world view: Think about your worldview until you get to the point where the narrative tells you that the important people in the world are the ones who focus in on their minds. There's a nice passage in one of Ajaan Maha Boowa's Dhamma talks, where he wrote a little introduction to the talk, saying that it was delivered to one of the more important monks of our day and age. It turned out that he was referring to a monk who was not well known at all, but someone with a high attainment. That's important. That's what makes a person important. What makes this world worth living is the fact that the world since the time of the Buddha has not been empty of arahants.

I know a couple of famous ajaans who've have said that this is one of the things they realize on gaining full awakening, that since the time of the Buddha we have not been empty of arahants. Those are the people who keep the world worthwhile.

That's where the worth of the mind is: in what it can do to clean itself out, to know itself.

So when you've cleaned out the mind, ask yourself: What are you going to do with this elephant you've got now? Elephants are good for work. They can drag large trees; they can lift large burdens. So what are the large trees in the mind that need to be dragged away? What are the burdens that need to be lifted off? Make sure you don't use this elephant to catch grasshoppers. Use it to accomplish something solid that more than repays all the work you went to in order to get this elephant trained.