

Recollecting the Buddha

March 15, 2023

Ajaan Lee recommends that you take the breath as your home base. This is the meditation topic you can use for really getting to know the mind. I've known some people who've studied in Tibetan traditions who say, "What's wrong with you Theravadans, focusing on the breath? When you die, the breath's going to leave you, and at that point, when you need your meditation object most, it's not going to be there."

But that ignores the point that when the Buddha teaches breath meditation, the focus is not just on the breath. Breath is, of course, the bodily fabrication *kaya-sankhara*, but his instructions also tell you to be sensitive to *citta-sankhara* or mental fabrication, which are your perceptions and feelings. And the instructions themselves are things you tell yourself: That's *vaci-sankhara*, verbal fabrication.

These are precisely the things you really have to watch out for as you die: what the mind tells itself, images that come into the mind, feelings that can overwhelm the mind. So you've got to be careful. You've got to familiarize yourself with these processes ahead of time, so that you can exert some skillful control over them.

And that's exactly what breath meditation is for: getting you familiar with these things, so that you're not overcome by feelings, and so that your perceptions don't pull you away to places that, if you had any sense at that point, you'd really not want to go.

The problem is that when you get forced out of the body, you don't feel you have much choice. You just grab whatever comes your way. You make your choices under duress. So you want to be really skilled with these things, which is why the breath is the topic that the Buddha taught more than any other meditation topic, and in more detail.

But in addition to having your home base—what in Pali they call *vihara-dhamma*—Ajaan Lee recommends that you have what he calls *gocara-dhamma* foraging places for the mind. These are meditation topics you can use to deal with specific problems as they come up.

One list that's popular in Thailand is called the guardian meditations: recollection of the Buddha, goodwill, contemplation of the foulness of the body, and recollection of death. Each of these topics is useful for a different defilement.

Recollection of the Buddha is good for when you're feeling doubtful, either about the

Dhamma or about yourself. You stop and think, “Who was the person who founded this Dhamma? What kind of person was he?” And you realize he was pretty amazing.

He had wealth and the potential for power, yet he turned his back on all that. He said he wanted something better than that. He went out into the wilderness, studied with two teachers, mastered their skills, and realized that they weren’t what he was looking for. He wanted something that didn’t die. That’s a pretty audacious desire.

In fact, we owe the Dhamma to his audacious desire. If he hadn’t allowed himself to desire something so out of the ordinary, something so special, we wouldn’t have the Dhamma we have now.

When he studied with those two ajaans and realized that what they taught didn’t lead to the deathless, he then submitted himself to six years of austerities to see if he could squeeze the mind away from pleasure and somehow gain awakening that way. Ultimately, he realized that that didn’t work, either. This is the part where he said he realized that he’d pursued austerities more than anybody else. That could have become a point of pride. But still he didn’t let that pride get in the way of his original desire, which was to find something deathless.

So then he tried the path of the jhānas. And then, adding on to the jhānas, he finally arrived to the noble eightfold path, and by following that path, he gained awakening. You read in his biography how he tested his awakening. The texts say that he spent seven weeks experiencing the bliss of awakening, the bliss of release. But there are passages where he also talks about how he looked at his awakening from many different angles to see if there could possibly be anything lacking. And he realized there wasn’t.

So everything he did, he put to the test. Even when awakening came, he put it to the test. That’s the kind of person we’re dealing with here: someone who’s very true.

In fact, the truthfulness of his character stands out more than anything else. It informs his wisdom, informs his purity, and informs his compassion—the virtues that are traditionally attributed to him. He was a very true person. It requires someone who’s true like that to find the truth.

So contemplating the Buddha in that way—if you have doubts about the Dhamma—helps to overcome those doubts. The problem with thinking about how amazing the Buddha was is that it sometimes gets in the way of the other way in which you can use the recollection of the Buddha to overcome doubt, and that’s when you have doubts about yourself. You look at the Buddha, and he seems so impossibly beyond where you are that it gets discouraging. That’s

when you have to realize he was a human being and he made mistakes.

If thinking about the Buddha is a little bit beyond the range of what you think is possible, well, think about the members of the Sangha: You read the verses of the Theragāthā and Therīgāthā, and you find people who were pretty desperate.

There's one monk who talks about how in the many years he was ordained he got only a finger-snap worth of mental calm. There's another monk who found that his mind would settle down and then it would unravel, settle down, unravel, and it did that seven times. In both cases, those monks got suicidal, but then they came to their senses and were able to get past their depression and finally attain awakening. You have to tell yourself that if they could do it, you can do it, too.

In fact, that's an attitude that Ven. Ānanda encourages. It's a form of conceit, but it's conceit that's useful on the path. As he said, "We practice to overcome conceit, but we need at least this much conceit that we feel that they're human beings, you're a human being; they can do it, you can do it, too."

The Buddha himself encourages a similar form of conceit when he talks about renunciate pain. He notices that we tend to live in household pleasure, household pain, household equanimity. We get things we like and we're happy. That's household pleasure. We get things we don't like and we're unhappy. That's household pain. We decide to be neutral about things, and we can do that for a while, but then we go back to being happy and unhappy about things of the senses. When we experience household pain, we go for household pleasure, which eventually leads to more household pain. We keep going around and around in this way. The best way out, the Buddha, is to try a new response to household pain—renunciate pain: thinking of the fact that there are people who've attained awakening, and yet you haven't gotten there yet. It's painful in the sense that you realize there's a goal that has to be attained, and there's going to be work to do it—but it's useful.

The Buddha wasn't the sort of person who said, "Well, having goals is oppressive to you, so just don't have goals." That may work on a weekend meditation retreat, where people sometimes put themselves under too much pressure, but for a lifetime practice, it doesn't work at all. When you look at the Buddha, you can see that he definitely had goals. So renunciate pain is a type of a pain we have to go through. And it's a pain that comes with conceit, "There's something I want that other people have, but I don't have it." But that, the Buddha says, is an attitude to be actively encouraged. It motivates you to practice.

So when you think about the Buddha, think about the Dhamma and the Sangha as well. Here again, though, it's a balancing act because sometimes you want to think about how amazing the Dhamma is and how amazing the members of the Sangha are.

Think about Ajaan Mun, who, together with Ajaan Sao, founded the Forest Tradition in the face of a lot of opposition from ecclesiastical authorities and from ordinary people around them—people who said they were being too extreme, they weren't following Thai customs, Lao customs. But they were determined: "Here's an opportunity to find the deathless. Let's go for it."

So we think about how amazing they are as a way of inspiring us that this is a really good path that we're on. But then if they get so amazing that you feel you're weak in comparison, you've got to back off a little bit and remind yourself, "Well, they were human beings, too."

We read their biographies, and there's a tendency in Thailand when you write the biography of an ajaan to say only the good things about him—which makes the ajaans seem impossibly determined, impossibly resilient. Their autobiographies, I find a little bit more approachable, because they'll tell you that they had these weaknesses, they had these doubts, they had these problems, and yet they overcame them. So inspire yourself that way.

So whichever form of doubt you have, tailor your recollection of the Buddha, together with the Dhamma and the Sangha to overcome that particular doubt. Then you can get back to the breath.

You've foraged around for a while, now it's the time to come back home with renewed confidence that what you're doing here is a good thing—and you can do it. That's what this particular recollection is for.