

## *The Teacher Inside*

*August 19, 2004*

Stick with the basics: The breath is coming in and you know it's coming in. It goes out and you know it's going out. Notice when it feels good, notice when it doesn't, and if it doesn't, you can change. You can experiment. The same holds true with the mind. Notice: Where are you focusing? Is this a good place to focus? If not, you can move. Be very deliberate in these steps, because when things go well in the meditation, you want to be able to remember what you did. If you're just mucking around in the present moment and happen to hit something good, you can't remember how you got there. But if you're deliberate in looking at the breath, looking at the mind, having some clear steps in mind, it allows you to make comparisons between different sessions of meditation, to figure out what works in which circumstances, and what doesn't.

This way, the pattern of the meditation becomes ingrained so that you don't get careless and complacent. All too often you say, "Well, I know the basics already. I'd like to move on to the higher things." But the higher things depend on the basics. You can't have the 53rd story of a building unless you have the first story, the second, the third, the fourth, and so on. So don't be too quick to jump over the basic steps, because everything in the meditation is right here. It's not that you're going to go someplace else. It's just that you want steps for knowing how to settle in and to know what you're doing.

This includes not only the right technique, but also the right attitude. Part of the right attitude is just this: being very careful, very meticulous. Second is doing it in a friendly way. The Buddha says it's important that when you meditate or engage in any part of the practice at all, that you do it with cordiality. In other words, you're cordial with the people around you, but more importantly, you're cordial with yourself, cordial with the breath, on good terms with your meditation, so that it doesn't become too much of a task. It *is* a task, but when you learn to do it with a sense of goodwill, with a good-natured attitude, you're not blown away by mistakes and you don't get too puffed up about the times when it goes well. You've got a friend who keeps you down to earth. The breath is still coming in and going out: That's the kind of friend you want along the path, someone to talk to, someone to joke with, someone to work with.

So be on good terms with the breath. If you find the meditation getting dry, usually the problem is not with the breath, it's with the mind: its attitude. It's either pushing too hard or getting discouraged or it's forgotten the basic steps. If

things start getting dry, just back up a bit and look at your attitude, and do what you can to put yourself in a better mood.

The Buddha talks about this in one of his discourses. He says to focus on the body in and of itself—in other words, your sensation of the body right here, right now, not in reference to whether you like it or not, but simply to what it is. If you focus on the body in reference to the world, all sorts of other issues come up—the question of whether it’s as good-looking as you’d like it to be, whether it’s as strong and healthy as you’d like it to be, as young as you’d like it to be—that can set you spinning off in all sorts of other directions.

But if you’re just with the body in and of itself—breath coming in, breath going out—sometimes, when you do that, a fever gets into the mind. In other words, the mind just doesn’t feel comfortable with this. So you say, “Stop. Think of something fun and inspiring, something uplifting.” Think about the Buddha, the Dhamma, the Sangha: whatever you find uplifting about them. We have specific ways of reflecting on the Buddha, those chants we have every morning and every evening, ways of reflecting on the Dhamma and the Sangha. But choose what you find most inspiring: which part of the Buddha’s story you find inspiring, which aspect of the Dhamma you find inspiring, which aspects of the noble Sangha you find inspiring, which side of yourself you find inspiring in terms of the good you’ve done in the past. Sometimes that will lift the mind up and put you in a better mood, give you a better attitude toward meditation. Then you can go back to the breath.

In other words, part of you is keeping tabs on how things are going. One of the paradoxes of meditation is that your mind is not only the thing being trained, it’s also the trainer. Even when you get advice from outside, with Dhamma talks every night, as the expression has it in Thai, “until your ears are all wet with all the Dhamma talks,” still you filter the Dhamma talks while you’re sitting. Then, as you go out and sit under the trees on your own, you’ve got to keep tabs on how things are doing. You need a sense of what’s just right.

So you’re training the mind not only to be a good meditator, but also to be a good teacher of meditation to itself, a good coach. This takes time, learning how to judge when things are going well, when you’re pushing too hard, when you’re not pushing enough. Fortunately, when things don’t go well, you can step back and start all over. Just try to learn from your mistakes.

It’s amazing how many of our attitudes toward work, toward ourselves, toward our life get played out just in the way we relate to the breath. This is why it’s such a good meditation topic, because it brings up all kinds of issues. If you can maintain

a level head while you're meditating, you begin to see exactly what triggers these issues, and what works in undoing them.

The important thing is that you not get exasperated, not get down on yourself. Learn how to deal with your mistakes. This is a talent that a lot of us have trouble with: one, admitting our mistakes; two, recognizing them, admitting them; and three, learning how to learn from them without getting tied up in knots.

One of the problems of our education system here is that it tends to track people from very early on. They look for what you're good at, almost inherently, and then they turn you in that direction to get you to specialize. As a result, very few of us learn how to develop talents in areas where we're not immediately talented, how to stick with something we find difficult until we really get the hang of it.

So it may not have come naturally, but eventually you learn how to be good at it. A large part of the right attitude is realizing that the skill of learning how to be skillful in things you're not immediately talented in depends on your attitude, learning how to relate to long-term projects, giving yourself pep talks along the way, recognizing when you're pushing too hard, recognizing when you're not pushing enough. How are you going to recognize this? Well, by pushing too hard and by not pushing enough, but then learning to notice, as you develop the ability to step back and notice, to step back and watch, to see the warning signs of too hard and not hard enough.

This is an essential part of the meditation: to bring the right attitude to it. Oftentimes the attitude is a lot more important than the technique. The technique is there to give you specific steps to follow so that you can remember: First you do this, this is how you focus on the breath, this is how you make the breath comfortable. Sometimes you consciously work with it, sometimes you simply try to make your awareness of the breath as continuous and non-stop as possible. The fact that you're consistently watching it seems to iron out a lot of the wrinkles.

Once you've got it comfortable, what's next? You know the problem when the breath gets comfortable is that you tend to get a little drowsy, tend to drift off. There are ways of fighting that. Ajaan Lee recommends going through the body section by section, noticing how the breath sensations feel in different parts of the body, and spreading awareness to fill the whole body. The steps are there, so that you can compare different meditations. Sometimes you approach a step one way, sometimes you approach it another way, sometimes you mix up the order a little bit to see what happens then. It gives you something to compare.

But underlying all this is the right attitude: the attitude that's willing to take chances and to learn from mistakes, the attitude that's willing to back up when things aren't going well and to start over from square one. This training in attitude should then carry out into your life. As I was saying just now, as you focus on the breath, you find all of your attitudes toward tasks in general suddenly centered on the breath. When you learn how to retrain those attitudes, you find you've retrained your attitudes not only toward this task, but also toward other tasks as well.

This is one of the ways in which meditation starts seeping through your life. You learn how to approach tasks that used to seem too daunting, too big to handle, and you learn to break them down into small manageable units. You can get your mind around the idea that you're actually doing them, and then you stick with it.

So remember as you're meditating, you're not only training the mind, you're also training the part of the mind that's the teacher of the mind, that watches, evaluates. Of course, the teacher is sure to make mistakes, like teachers in real life. The first couple of classes that a teacher teaches may not come out all that well because the teacher is still learning the ropes. If the teacher refuses to notice mistakes, admit mistakes and learn from them, he'll continue making the same mistakes over and over and over again. But if you have the right attitude toward your mistakes, you find that you get better and better and better.

Fortunately, the mind keeps coming back, because it keeps having that same problem: It's still suffering here. It wants to do something about it. With time, the teacher part of the mind has more and more to offer, because it's more and more experienced. As Ajaan Fuang used to say, this teacher inside the mind is a very important part of the meditation, first to make sure the mind does its work on time. He says it's like having a teacher in the classroom as opposed to a teacher outside the classroom. When the teacher is in the classroom, the kids are obedient. They do their work. But the wise teacher also knows how to pace the classroom, how to encourage the lazy students, how to challenge the sharp students, so that everybody in the class benefits.

When you notice the voice in the mind that's monitoring your meditation, check it against the voices of wise teachers you've had in the past. That's one way you can get an idea of which voices you should be listening to, whose judgment you should be taking seriously. It's the teacher with the all-around perspective who has the most to offer.