

Booster Stages

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The Buddha was a master of the apt simile, the apt comparison, but even he found himself stymied when it came to finding comparison for how quickly the mind can change. Attitudes you may have held for a long time, you can drop in a fraction of a second. Intentions that you sincerely wish for, you can drop very quickly—and then you want to pick them up again.

This is both a problem and part of the solution to the problem. The problem is that you can't really trust your own mind. Things that you've worked on for years and years, you suddenly can destroy with one simple change of your mind. Then it takes years to undo the damage.

The solution is that you can notice when the mind is getting destructive and you can turn it around.

So this is something you have to be very careful about. This is why we meditate, why we develop mindfulness and alertness, because it's a lack of mindfulness and lack of alertness that allows the mind to change so quickly and do things that are very destructive. You want to strengthen these good qualities as much as you can.

Part of that lies in having confidence that this is a good path to follow, along with confidence that you can do it. Ajaan Suwat used to stress this point over and over again at the beginning of the meditation. Develop an attitude of confidence, he said, an attitude of conviction, not only while you're meditating, but also throughout the day. All the people in the past who found true happiness: This is how they did it. Do you want true happiness? Most often you'll say, "Yes," but a lot of time you can also tell yourself, "No, I just want something right now, instant gratification." And there goes true happiness: cast away like a piece of trash.

So try to be careful about this. Nurture an attitude of conviction, an attitude of confidence in the path and in your own ability to follow it, because this, as the Buddha said, is what keeps you working away at the path. It can be a long path. It requires persistence as you stick with it day in, day out. You have to develop an attitude of consistency in your effort.

This confidence and conviction can also lead to the strengthening your mindfulness and concentration. This is the kind of inner dialogue that's actually helpful: learning how to encourage yourself, learning how to remind yourself of the rewards that come from sticking with this path. It's not the kind of a path that

requires that you lie to yourself, or that you disguise certain facts about yourself from yourself, that you turn a blind eye to certain parts of reality.

So much of the happiness offered by the world is just that—something dependent on being blind—but the qualities we're developing on the path are not like that at all. Honesty, mindfulness, using your powers of observation, admitting the truth: All of these qualities help to develop a sense of wholeness in the mind. You don't have to put up walls of ignorance, compartmentalizing this little piece of knowledge, that little piece of belief, making sure they don't touch each other. The Dhamma allows you to be honest and open inside about everything.

So it's a good path to follow. And this ability to have this kind of dialogue inside is what enables you to get into good states of concentration. In fact it actually forms part of the first level of jhana: directed thought and evaluation.

There's a passage where the Buddha says that if you find that the way you're focusing on the body makes you anxious, irritable, uncomfortable in the present, try to focus on a theme that inspires you, that gives rise to a sense of clarity, confidence in the mind. Then, when that theme has done its work, you can put it aside. That's when you find yourself in the second jhana.

So this kind of inner encouragement is an important part of the path. It's an important part of the concentration. It keeps you with the breath, keeps you exploring the breath, learning new things about the breath energy in the body.

And it's not the case that you have to wait until the end of the path to see the results. When you're working well with the breath, you find that it is healing. It nourishes all the different organs in the body—if you learn to observe it, if you learn to use it well. It creates a sense of well-being right here. Then, when that kind of thinking has done its work, you put it aside.

Ajaan Fuang's analogy is of a rocket. I don't know how he found out about this, but he knew that the rockets going to the Moon required booster rockets that were let go in different stages until finally all you had was a little capsule that made it to the Moon. And, he said, it's the same with meditation. The encouraging thoughts that allow you to settle down in the present then have to give way to the actual analysis of what you're doing in the present, to see where your focus is right, where it's wrong, where the breath can be adjusted, where it's best not to adjust the breath. After you've done that kind of work, then you let go of that voice, and that allows you to be firmly planted in the breath with a sense of real oneness.

So it's important to have a good sense of what kind of inner dialogue or inner conversation is appropriate at what particular time, starting with the ability to keep reminding yourself of the value of being on the path. That helps to hold at

bay other negative and destructive attitudes, and allows you to do the work that gives you a place to settle down. Once you've got a place to settle down, then you can do the analysis that allows you to settle down with a full sense of well-being. Then that can be put aside as well. You can just stay, stay, stay, right here. There will still be a voice in the back of the mind, but it's more a voice of maintaining what you've got. It's a slightly different skill from getting the mind into concentration. It requires a lighter touch. Less conversation.

Or like when you're sailing: It takes a while for the sails to finally catch the wind, then your work at the rudder is different from the way it was before the sails caught the wind.

As Ajaan Fuang used to say, there are three stages in what we're doing here. One is getting the mind into the concentration. The next is maintaining it. These two are related skills but they're separate. Then, finally, you put it to use—in other words, using the concentration for gaining further insights.

So you need to have a sense of where you are on the path, of what kind of inner policemen you need to look over the mind to make sure that it's not doing destructive things to itself and that it actually is working on constructive attitudes. Then you have to keep watch on how you use those constructive attitudes to get the mind to be stronger, more firmly centered in its conviction, in its persistence, its mindfulness, concentration, and discernment.

That's how this changeable mind of yours can really be trained so that it doesn't keep destroying itself, so that it can build the path it needs to get to the point where it's no longer changeable. Only when it gets there can it really trust itself. And only when you can really trust yourself can you have any real peace, any real happiness.