The Goose & the Golden Eggs

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Going off to live alone, cut off from other people, is usually a recipe for going crazy. You have no break on your thoughts, no one to tell you that you’re getting a little strange. So the question is, how did the great Ajahns go off and live alone and come back to the not crazy, but awakened? It’s because they were able to monitor their minds. There was a part of them that could watch all the other parts, and that part was very strong and very well-trained. So as you’re meditating on your own, and even if you’re here at the monastery spending parts of your day alone in the forest, when you’re meditating on your own at home, you need some basic principles to monitor your mind, to make sure that things don’t get strange. The first thing is that you can’t trust everything that comes up in a quiet mind. Visions, insights, whatever, has to be tested. In other words, remember, the whole purpose of the practice is to learn how to watch your actions, to figure out what’s skillful or not. And the same test has to be applied to the insights or the lessons you learn. There’s a nice story. There was a woman, Kuntava Satyararaka. She was a student of Ajahn Lee’s. She kept a diary of her meditation. One day in her meditation she had this vision, and the voice in the vision said, “This is what happened when you were living in Jetavana.” When she came out of the meditation, for the life of her, she could not remember what Jetavana was or where it was. Three days before she remembered it all. That was the Buddha’s monastery. We chanted about it all the time. But instead of getting excited about the fact that she could remember something that happened in Jetavana, the Buddha’s monastery, she commented on how inconstant your perceptions are. Things you know, things you repeat day after day after day, you can still forget. So she turned it into a Dhamma lesson. That’s what you have to do. If a vision comes up, ask yourself, “What’s the Dhamma lesson here?” And then you have to test the Dhamma lesson. Some Dhamma lessons you know really aren’t Dhamma to begin with. You don’t have to test those. But there are others where you’re not sure, so give it a try. Don’t give it your full conviction. Wait until something passes the test many, many times, and then you say, “Okay, this is reliable.” It’s the same with other insights that come up. In Ajahn Fung’s first rule of thumb is that you don’t try to memorize the insights, otherwise you’ll forget them. But as he said, if it’s really valuable, it’ll stick with you. You won’t forget. In the meantime, you don’t want anything to disturb your concentration. Think of your concentration as a goose that lays golden eggs. And if you spend all your time gathering the eggs and keeping them, and forget to look after the goose, the goose will die. And that’s it. No more insights. Then it turns out the gold in these golden eggs is like the gold in most fairy tales. If you don’t put it to a wise use right away, it turns into feathers and ashes. So look after the goose. It’ll keep producing the golden eggs when you need them. And they’ll be right for what you’re up to at the time. At least more likely to be right than if you’re just trying to think things out on your own. Again, there’s no 100 percent guarantee. But remember, you look after the goose and the eggs will take care of themselves. When they come out, can you use them right now? Okay, put them to use. If you can’t, just forget about them. If it turns out that when you come out of meditation and one of these insights is still there in your mind, you might ask yourself, “How does this affect the way I might act in the world? Is it going to make a difference in how I treat other people, in how I approach my work, approach my family life?” Again, if the insight has some relevance to your actual life, you might give it a try to test it to see if it really is an insight, if it really is wisdom, or if it’s just a random thought. Remember that when you get the mind to settle down, it’s like opening up a lot of the doors in the house. In rooms that you may have closed off a long time ago, things will come out. That’s not the case. The things you’ve locked away in the rooms are all wonderful treasures. Sometimes it’s junk. So the principle always is to put things to the test. And if the insight isn’t relevant to your actual actions, and if someone one time tended to have things coming into her mind when she was concentrated, there were visions or messages about the meaning of the world or the meaning of the universe or whatever, and those are not relevant to your actions, just let them go. The Buddha was wise enough not to get entangled in those things, and he set a good example. There’s that sutra where the Buddha’s talking to the Kalamas. He says, on the one hand, “Don’t go by traditions and don’t accept something just because your teacher said it.” But at the same time, he also says, “You can’t trust your own opinions. You can’t trust even things that seem reasonable to you.” So what does that leave? You’ve got to put things to the test. Listen to the wise. What do you think they would say? And see what works and see what doesn’t work. An important part of the meditation is learning to raise your standards for what works. Get more sensitive to when something may be working for a little while and it doesn’t work after a while. Learning to put it aside. But not totally throwing it away. Maybe there’ll be a time when it will work again. So just put it aside and focus on what the particular issue is right then, right there. So in this way, the things that come up in your meditation don’t pull you away, don’t destabilize you. So it’s important to have this monitor inside. And if your monitor is not sure about something—remember Ajahn Mun’s advice to Ajahn Mahaprabhu—if there’s something you’re not sure of, just stay with your sense of awareness and let it pass. Don’t get involved one way or the other. And you’re sure to come out safe.

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