

The Need for Stillness

April 12, 2005

One of the famous teachings of Ajaan Dune, who was one of Ajaan Mun's students, is his definition of the four noble truths. The cause of suffering, he says, is sending the mind out, sending your attention, sending your awareness outside, and suffering is what results from that. The path, he says, is having the mind watch the mind, having the mind see the mind. And the end of suffering is what results from that. So it's the movement that makes us suffer, and just having the mind stay still right at the mind, that's the path.

So where's the discernment in that stillness? It's in seeing the motions and letting them stop. Ajaan Mun himself once said that a state of totally no motion at all is the end of suffering—the end of the world, the normal world of our experience. Ajaan Dune talks about the same thing, and the Buddha talks about the same thing: There's no motion in the awakened mind.

But if we look at our own minds, we see that they're moving all over the place. What we're doing as we're practicing is learning to get a standpoint where we can be more and more still, or at least a part of our awareness can be still, so that it can see the motions of the other parts. The more still you are, the more you can see them, from the very beginning to the very end: See what starts them, see how they continue, and see what they lead to.

That's the discernment we're after. Because as soon as you see the whole picture, the whole trajectory, you see the suffering that comes from those motions in the mind, and you also see that you're implicated in them, that there is an element of intention that was a choice. You could follow that motion or you could choose not to. But if it's going to cause suffering, why choose to follow the motion? That's the nature of insight. Once you see that, you drop it.

You can think of the practice as a process of getting progressively more and more still for longer periods of time, and then using that stillness to see more and more refined movements. If you're moving around a lot, you can't tell when something else is moving. Things that look perfectly still to you may not actually be still. It's like standing under the hummingbird feeder over there. The hummingbirds are zipping around all the time. And if you just stand there and move very slowly, after a while they assume that you're a big rock, or a big, solid thing that doesn't move at all, because they're moving a lot faster. It's only when

you make a sudden movement that they pick up on the fact that you're there, and that you're a threat, and they fly away.

This is why it's so important to get the mind to be as still as possible: because the more still it is, the more you can see.

There are people who get the mind very still, but then just curl up in the stillness and not use it to any purpose. But that's not what the Buddha taught. You get the mind still and you want to be aware all around. This is why Ajaan Lee, when he defines alertness, talks about it going to back and forth. You look, say, at your breath, and then you turn around and look at the mind. You're alert to both to see how they're connected—and to be aware of any movement where the mind pulls away.

It's that all-around kind of alertness you want, because often, as the mind gets really, really still, nothing seems to be going on in the mind. But there's still a kind of commentary, just a commentary that says "space, space," or "knowing, knowing," "nothing, nothing." That's a movement of the mind, too. You've got to turn around and look at that and recognize: "Oh, there's this movement here." Everything else seemed to be still, you thought that everything was nice and still, but there's still this happening. Discernment lies in seeing both sides: seeing whatever movements of thought, or feeling, or perception are going on, and also the part of the mind that seems to be humming along with them, or following along with them, commenting on them. You can see the first kind of thing arising and passing away, and that is an important element of insight, but the other element lies in seeing the part that's commenting on all of this.

Once there was a person from Singapore who wrote a letter to Ajaan Fuang describing his practice, which was to see everything in terms of the three characteristics. When he was at work, when he was watching TV, he just kept noting to himself: This is impermanent, stressful, not-self, whatever. And Ajaan Fuang's advice to him was to turn around and see who was doing the commenting, because, he said, the problem lies there. It's not in the inconstancy of TV shows or the stress of your work, it's the inconstancy of this commentator. Because once the commentator passes judgment on something, then some intentions arise. And the intentions are what keeps everything going. Until you see that, there is no real, true letting go. Your letting go isn't total. It's only when the letting go is total that you open up to something totally different that has no motions. Because it's the motions of the mind that keep the whole process going.

It's kind of like a weaver. It keeps weaving your experience of space and time, and it can weave it with craving, and it can weave it with perceptions, feelings, and all these other things. But that element of intention and attention: That's what

keeps it all going. And until you can see those things moving, nothing really disbands. But once your stillness is still enough, and your awareness is all-around enough to the point to where you catch even the slightest movement anywhere in the mind, that's when things open up.

So the practice of stillness is not simply something you do waiting for discernment to come later on. There will be things that you discern. Sometimes it's kind of discouraging. You try to get the mind even a little bit still, and you notice there's all this movement going on. Well, that's discernment: seeing the movement. Discernment gets more full, though, when you can see the movement from the beginning to the end, to the point that where you say: That particular movement, I don't want to get involved in. And when you don't get involved in it, it drops away. Then everything seems absolutely still. But then the longer you stay with the stillness, the more you see subtle things that you didn't see before. And then it's the same process: trying to see them from the beginning to the end, arising, staying for a while, and then passing away. That's when you can let them go.

So the development of concentration is not a waste of time, or a delay in insight. It provides you with the observer, or a basis for the observer, that allows you to watch your thought-processes and to see, "Oh, if I think in this way, it's going to cause suffering. No matter how long I've been thinking this way, no matter how integral a habit it seems to be for me, I always have the choice to drop it once I see that, one, it's arbitrary, and two, it's causing suffering." Arbitrary in the sense that you didn't have to choose to be that way, or think that way, or act that way. Suffering in the sense that it's stressful—even minimally stressful. This is how concentration and discernment work together.

All of what they call the noble dhammas—virtue, concentration, discernment, and release—are all related to stillness in this way. Virtue is a way of stilling your actions, the things that you used to do without thinking. Suddenly you realize: "I can't do that anymore." You begin to see that those actions you've learned to stop doing really do cause suffering. You don't have to wait to the next life to see the results, they cause suffering right now. And so on down the line to concentration and discernment: It's a matter of getting as still as possible in your thoughts, words, and deeds, so that you can see the motions on the mind, and let go of any that are unnecessary and cause unnecessary suffering—simply that your idea of what's necessary is going to get more and more refined. The more stable your stillness, the more all-around your awareness.

So even though the idea of release or deathless may seem very far away from the mind that you're sitting here looking at right now, the processes of the

meditation, just trying to get things still, trying to get at least some things still in the mind, and then using your alertness to maintain that stillness, using your mindfulness to maintain that stillness: Those are the tools that, as they get more refined, will start sorting everything out.