

Your Inner Teacher

November 21, 2005

When you listen to a Dhamma talk while you're meditating, don't put much energy into listening. Put most of your energy into the meditating. Otherwise, the talk will interfere with the meditating, which is not what you want. The talk is here to act as a fence. If your mind wanders off the breath, if it wanders away from your body, here's the sound of the talk to send you back, to remind you of why you're meditating, and sometimes to point out things that you might not have thought of otherwise. But still, the talk is meant to be here in the background. If there's anything in the talk that's relevant to your meditation, it'll come in. You'll recognize it immediately—and you should put it to use immediately. Don't try to store it away.

Old insights tend to get old pretty fast, especially insights that are not really relevant to what you're doing right now. Maybe those comments are meant for somebody else. Maybe the person giving the talk means them for himself. It's not the case that you have to catch everything that comes in the talk. Just make note of the things that are really useful. Put them to use and see what results you get.

One of the most important skills in the meditation is training yourself to be your own teacher, your own observer, your own advisor. The role of the external teacher is to eventually fade into the background, as your internal teacher gets more and more skilled, more and more reliable. But this requires that you be really observant—observant of your intentions, observant of the results—and that you use your ingenuity. When issues come up that you haven't dealt with before, what things in your past experiences might be useful or helpful to bring to bear? Ingenuity doesn't make up things out of whole cloth. It takes old things and rearranges them.

Ajaan Fuang once said of his experience as a teacher that the seven steps in Ajaan Lee's Method Two were the basic principles that he worked with. He said that any issue that comes up in the course of concentration practice can be related to one of those seven steps. So keep those steps in mind as your basic principles. If a problem comes up, assume that one of the seven is lacking. All you have to do is figure out which one and to work out variations on how to apply it. The principles admit of a lot of variation.

So it's not as if you're cast out at sea with nothing to hold on to. You've got these instructions. But the ways of the mind are many. There are a lot more ins and outs to the mind than there are ins and outs to the breath. Still, they don't lie

beyond your power as a human being to observe them, if you take the time, if you pay attention.

The Buddha once said of people that it takes time to know them—and not just time. You also have to be observant. As he said, if you want to know a person's virtue, you have to live with that person for a long time and be very observant. If you want to know that person's purity—in other words, that person's honesty, uprightness—you have to have dealings with that person over a long period of time and you have to be very observant. To know a person's powers of endurance and resilience, you have to see that person dealing with difficult situations—and, again, over a long period of time, and you have to be observant. If you want to a person's discernment, you have to see how that person deals with questions, knowing if the question needs to be rephrased, if the question needs to be put aside, answered with a counter question, or given just a plain old straight answer. That's how you can get a sense that person's powers of discernment. But again, it takes time, and you have to be observant.

The same requirements apply to yourself. It's amazing how many of us can go through life and not really know our own minds. When we talk about the subconscious, it's not one big cellar out of which monsters sometimes creep up through the heat registers or the stairway. Subconscious events are events going on in the mind all the time when you're not paying attention, or that you—consciously or subconsciously—willfully ignore. You go into denial.

This is why it's so difficult to train the mind. The mind has this tendency toward denial, to block things out. What we're doing as we meditate is to put the mind in a good place where it can begin to look at these things for what they are, and not have that immediate aversion that makes you block them out. But this takes time, and you have to be observant. In this way, you begin to know the virtue, the purity, the endurance, and the discernment of your own mind, in the same way that you can get to know someone else. This is why meditation takes so much time.

But the important thing is that you do it with an attitude of goodwill. Just a few days ago, during an all-day course in Laguna, one of the women who has been practicing meditation for years now said she finally had an insight into why there's so much emphasis on goodwill. She had thought it was self-indulgent. But now she realized that we make goodwill the basis for the practice because if the mind is going to understand itself, it has to have goodwill for itself. If you're going to deal with the difficult issues inside, you have to do it in an atmosphere of goodwill.

Basically you're working here for your own best interest. Everybody in the mind is trying to work for your own best interest. When you have the attitude,

then it's a lot easier to deal with the difficult issues as they come up, to start looking at things that you've been hiding from yourself. This is one of the attributes of a good external teacher, and it's an attribute of a good internal teacher, too: You're not afraid to look at things. You're not afraid to call a spade a spade—because then you can figure out what best to do with the spade.

So as you work on this internal teacher, try to develop this quality of being observant and being able stick with things for a long period of time. Stick with the breath. Stick with your intention to be ardent, alert, and mindful. In this way, the things you observe, the insights you gain, will not just be little dots here and there that you have to connect afterwards. All the elements will be there. All the lines will connect on their own because you're with the line, watching, all the time. When you make yourself a more reliable observer in this way, you become a more reliable person. And you become a more reliable teacher for yourself. It's when you can become a reliable teacher for yourself: That's when you can be a help to other people as well. But it's got to start from within.