

## *Horror Stories*

*July 12, 2008*

Tonight I'd like to talk about two scary things. Not horror stories, although in one sense they *are* horror stories: two ideas that are getting spread around, that we as meditators should avoid.

The first comes from an incident a couple of years back.

A couple of us were up in Seattle and some people showing us around through the library there, the Koolhaas library, and it was pretty cool. Lots of neat little architectural ideas.

Toward the end of the tour, the woman who was leading the tour, who had had lots of contact with other monks in different branches of the Forest tradition, turned to me and said, "You're not like other monks. You notice things."

I'm not saying that to brag. I'm saying that because it's scary: that people out there have been given the idea that the duty of a monk is not to notice things—that you're supposed to have blinders on your eyes and cotton stuffed in your ears, that in your restraint of the senses you're supposed to be oblivious to what's going on around you.

But that's not what restraint means at all.

When you meditate, how are you going to gain any knowledge if you don't notice things? Because as you sit here with the breath, it's the same place, over and over and over again. And the only difference between sitting here and muddling through, and sitting here and gaining awakening, is that in awakening, you notice things that have been here all along.

They may have been too subtle, or you were looking in the wrong place, or you had the wrong ideas to begin with. But the problem is that something was going on that you weren't noticing. And the whole purpose of meditating to get the mind really still, is that you can notice things more clearly.

In particular, you can see your own actions more clearly, detecting where you're causing unnecessary stress, where you're causing unnecessary harm, and how you can find another way to act so that you're not causing the stress or the harm. And to do that, you've got to notice things very carefully.

When I first went to stay with Ajaan Fuang, after my return to Thailand to ordain in 1976, one of the things he told me before I ordained was, "You're going to have to learn to think like a thief. Don't expect everything to be explained to you."

I thought about that. How does a thief think?

Suppose you were a thief and you wanted to rob somebody's house. Would you go to the front step and knock on the door and say, "Excuse me, when are you going to be away from home, and, by the way, where do you keep your valuables?"

Thieves don't act that way.

They case they joint, they watch it surreptitiously, trying to see the things that the owners don't want them to see. In other words, they have to notice, and not simply wait for everything to be told to them. They have to try to figure things out on their own.

That's the second scary thing.

Recently we got a CD of Dharma talks, and one of the things the teacher in the Dharma talks was saying is that, "As you meditate, don't try to figure things out. Just let go."

Well, there are two ways of letting go.

One is just telling yourself to let go. But when you let go in that way, of course, what happens is as soon as your attention is diverted, you pick things back up again if that's your old habit.

The other way, the way that really works, is that you have to see through the habit. You have to figure out: Why do you try to hold on to things to begin with?

If you understand why you hold on, and you also understand the drawbacks of holding on, and you realize that you have an alternative, then you let go. You don't have to tell yourself to let go. It's automatic. That kind of letting go comes through understanding, and the understanding does come through trying to figure things out.

I think I've told you many times before that when I was staying with Ajaan Fuang, I was his attendant, and it's not the case that he told me where things should go or how things should be folded up, or what should be prepared first and what should be prepared second. If I did something wrong, he'd let me know, but he wouldn't tell me what the right way to do things was.

And he wouldn't reward me when I did them right. He would just accept it as normal.

So that meant, again, I had to be observant, and also figure things out.

If he wanted to take a bath, what were the signs that he was getting ready to take his bath, so I'd have things prepared? If he wanted to be left alone, how could I figure that out without asking him or without his having to tell me to go away?

Little things like that. Little, but over time they have a big impact.

You find that when you figure things out on your own, it makes a bigger impression on your mind. You retain it a lot longer than if you're simply told, "Well, this is the way things have to be. This has to be done this way, do this, watch for that."

Those lessons you don't remember nearly as well.

This is why I was shocked to hear that someone has written down a book of all the different protocols that monks are supposed to follow at the monasteries in Thailand. All you have to do is memorize the protocols in the book and there you are, you know everything you need to know. But you don't really know it because you don't know why.

There's a reason for the protocols.

Sometimes you hear it said that, "Well, this is because Ajaan Mun had a vision that this was the way it should be done." But Ajaan Mun wasn't the sort of person who just believed his visions. He would notice that if you arranged things in this way or if you didn't arrange things in that way, what affect it was going to have on your mind. If you arrange things in a certain way, which was the best way to arrange things? What was the best way to do things, even little simple things like sweeping out your hut, taking care of your robes.

And the fact is, as monks, that we have so few possessions, which means that we can learn how to take care of our possessions very well, and use them as object lessons in learning how to be observant and how to figure things out, to notice what's the best way of doing things.

We have the rules in the Vinaya to tell us the things that are really wrong and really right to do, but then there are the finer shades of things: What is the best way to clean out the sala, what is the best way to sweep, what's the best way to mop, what's the best way to wipe down a floor?

There *is* a best way, and it's more fun to try to figure it out on your own than to simply be told that "This is how it's done, make sure you do it like this, and behave."

That doesn't teach you to observe. It teaches you how to fit in, but then part of you is going to rebel: So why should I fit in?

But if you discover for yourself that this is the best way to sweep, it's your discovery. You've exercised your own powers of observation, your ability to pose a question and then figure out how to answer it.

Those are the qualities that make all the difference in your meditation.

You look at the Buddha's instructions on mediation. He doesn't lay everything out. He basically poses questions for you.

He says, "Learn how to breathe in long, breath out long, breathe out short, breathe out short." And then it's up to you to decide: When is it best to breathe in long and when is it best to breathe in short?

Then he tells you to be aware of the whole body as you breathe in and then to calm the motions of the breath. How do you do that? You experiment. You try different ways of doing things and you observe for yourself that you like this way of doing it.

That helps the mind to settle down.

Again, part of the reason you like learning this way is because it's *your* discovery, and also it's exercised your powers of observation.

As I said earlier, the place where you're going to find awakening is a place you've been many, many times before, just focused in the present moment, noticing how the breath changes, how it has an impact on the body, how it has an impact on the mind, how the mind has an impact on the breath, and how your perceptions have an impact on both body and mind.

The breath is the place where basically the mind and the body meet.

The difference is that there will come a point where you really see something that's been there all along, but you were looking at it from the wrong angle or asking the wrong questions, or just simply weren't quiet enough to see what was going on. You were rushing in with your own preconceived notions that this has to be this and that has to be that. When you breathe in, this has to happen; when you breathe out, that has to happen.

So how about thinking of all the breath channels in your body wide open, and let them take care of all your breath needs. Just hold that thought in mind and see what happens. In other words, allow a different way of thinking about what's going on here.

Then you begin to notice the power that your perceptions have over how you experience the physicality of your body, something we take for granted: that it has to be this way because this is the way it is. After all, it's solid, it's matter.

But then, your experience of matter is filtered through your preconceived notions. So try changing a few of those notions and see what happens.

You've got to turn things over in your mind. You've got to be observant. Learn this habit in all of your activities because it's going to be *the* habit that makes all the difference in your meditation—so that we won't hear horror stories about the monks from Wat Metta who don't observe things and don't figure things out.

This habit of being observant, of noticing things, is one of the most important gifts we've been given by the Forest tradition, and the Forest monks picked it up from the Buddha himself.

The Buddha was a very observant person. After all, how else was he going to gain awakening? He had to figure things out. How would he have come up with all those teachings if he hadn't tried to figure things out?

You look at the story of his life. He ran into several dead ends every now and then. He found that the pursuit of sensual pleasures was a dead end, so he tried to figure out what he could do differently. It wasn't that the answer came blazoned across the sky.

After a lot of thinking, he finally realized that he was going to have to leave home. When he left home, he ran into other dead ends. He tried all the good teachers of that time, and they didn't teach a teaching that was satisfactory.

Another dead end.

So he tried to figure out what he might do. He pursued self-torture for a while. He had his mind in the state of concentration that was based on not allowing himself to breathe, subsisting on very little food to see what that would do to purify the mind. After six years—six years, think of that—he realized that self-torture was a dead end as well. So he had to figure out what alternatives were left. He had tried the pursuit of sensual pleasure, that didn't work. He had tried running away from pleasure, that didn't work.

Then he finally realized, "Oh." He remembered when as a child he'd been spontaneously able to enter the first jhana, a state where the mind was thinking about and evaluating its object with a sense of ease and rapture.

Could that be the way?

He realized, "Yes. That could be the way."

But it was a way that he had never heard anybody explore before.

Basically he was going to learn how to use that sense of pleasure and rapture and, instead of just pursuing it, put it to use to put the mind in a state where it could observe even more carefully: What's the cause of suffering, where is it found, what can we do to put an end to it, what is the end of suffering like?

The potentials were all there in the present moment, simply that he hadn't been in the right space, and hadn't had the right supporting factors in mind to really observe carefully what was happening.

If he hadn't been observant to begin with, he probably wouldn't have realized the limitations of his teachers, might not even have realized the limitations of a life of the pursuit of sensual pleasure.

It was because he was observant that he realized that he had hit some dead ends.

It was because he was willing to try to figure things out, that was why he was able to find other paths, until finally the combination of those two qualities brought him to the right spot where he could see things clearly for what they were, how they'd come to be, and how he could let them go so as to put an end to suffering, in a way that came from understanding.

So always keep this in mind: You want to notice things. You want to figure things out.

That's what the meditation is all about.