

Get Out of the Way

December 7, 2010

The mind has its ups and downs, and we have to learn how not to get upset by the downs or complacent about the ups. This is where patience and equanimity, combined with conviction, are important elements in the path. On days when you're down, when the mind is just not cooperating, realize that it's a normal part of the process. The mind is a very complicated thing to train. There's a passage in the Canon where an elephant trainer is talking to the Buddha. He says, "Elephants are a lot easier to understand than human beings." He notes that within the course of a few days he can get to know an elephant, and he knows all the tricks that that elephant has up its sleeves—if an elephant were to have sleeves. But as for human beings, he says, human beings are a mystery.

All kinds of things go on in the mind. And you have to accept it as normal that the mind is not going to always respond the way you want it to. Something is going on that you may not know about, or may be hidden from you, and you all you can get little glimpses here and there, like the micro-expressions that flit across people's faces. So the best attitude to take at times like that is to remind yourself: We're here to learn, and sometimes the lesson we're learning is that this is what the mind is like when it's not cooperative.

But you don't just stop with patience. You're patient so that you can observe. You want to watch, watch, watch: What's the mind doing? Sometimes it'll give you little clues. If you give up and say, "Well, today is a bad day to meditate," or "Right now is a bad time to meditate," and stop meditating, you'll never see what's actually going on. Actually, the mind is displaying all kinds of stuff for you to see. It's just a question of whether you're looking at the right spot, or if your powers of perception are subtle enough.

Focus on what strengths you do have. All too often when things are difficult, we let the difficulties get us down. We pile more difficulties on top of ourselves. So make a survey of what *is* going well. At least you're sitting here, you're not harming anybody, and you're not allowing yourself to be totally overwhelmed by whatever is going through the mind.

This is also a good time to learn a little bit about not-self. In other words, whatever comes up in the mind, you don't have to identify with it. Sometimes we're very responsible. With every little thought that comes up in the mind, we

feel we have to look at it, examine it, file it away, pass judgment on it: whether it's useful or not. But for the time being, you don't have to be responsible for any of these thoughts. You have one thought you want to hold onto. You just want to stay alert in the present moment. If you can stay with the breath, try to notice where the breath is in the midst of all this, and just hang on. As for anything else that comes by, just learn how to get out of the way.

Ajaan Fuang had a student who had had cancer, and after one of her operations they gave her radiation treatment. She discovered that she was allergic to the anesthetic, so the doctors were stymied. She said, "Well, can you do it without the anesthetic?" They said, "The pain is intense." And she told them, "Well, I'm a meditator." So they tried it, and she was able to get through it. But she said that she was exhausted at the end of the treatment because she had been using her powers of concentration just to focus, focus, focus, and not allow herself to have any reaction to the pain. Afterwards, Ajaan Fuang went to visit her and asked her how it went. She explained, and he told her, "You can't use just your concentration. You also have to use your discernment."

One way of doing that is to see that the pain is inconstant. Even though there's a steady stream of little pain packets, each little pain packet does go away, go away before it's replaced by another one. But the other point is just to get out of the way. Don't have a "you" in there that's experiencing the pain, that has to get involved with the pain, that has to be responsible for the pain. The woman later told me that the next time she underwent the treatment, it went a lot more easily. It didn't require so much physical and mental energy.

The insight there was a way of making things, you might say, more efficient, not expending so much energy just fighting things off. You learn how to get out of the way. So when thoughts come in to disturb you, just get out of the way. Think of yourself as a large window screen, the thoughts are like a breeze coming through the screen, and the screen doesn't catch the breeze. It's right there in the midst of the breeze but it doesn't take responsibility for the breeze, doesn't have to get involved with the breeze at all. It's just right here, right here, right here. That way, the breeze doesn't disturb the screen. Now, you may rather not have that breeze of thoughts coming through your mind, but just being the screen puts you in a better position. You're a lot less involved in having to take care of it because if you don't get involved with the thoughts, they have to pass through and away on their own. The mind stays as it is.

This is a useful image to keep in mind when you're meditating in an area where there's a lot of noise. I learned it one time in Bangkok. I was staying in a monastery there and didn't realize that right outside my window was a little store

that opened up at 4 a.m. They served rice porridge to the little tuk-tuk drivers, and had a big boombox. In the evening, they had the boombox on, and then again in the morning, to let the tuk-tuk drivers know they were open for business. I found I could actually meditate in the midst of the noise if I just got out of the way. In other words, the thoughts about the noise—let them go; the noise—just let it go; whatever had anything to do with the noise—just let it go, let it go right through. That made things made it a lot easier. I didn't have to expend so much energy and fighting off the noise.

Another time we were camping in Arches National Park. It was November and we thought we had the campground to ourselves, but then somebody showed up late at night, and they too had a boombox. So again, I was just a screen for the sound to go through.

You can apply the same approach to your thoughts. They're going to arise, and you just stay there as a screen, letting them go through, go through. After a while, when you learn how to step out of the way, you can begin to watch them. You begin to see where in the body a particular thought tends to gather up tension. The little knots of tension that correspond to the thought: This is how a thought takes hold. If you can sense where in the body it's happening, you can just breathe right through it, make your screen a screen of all the different breath channels in the body, and make sure there are no knots in the screen. As soon as you see a little knot forming, just breathe right through it. Open up the flow. And that's all you have to do.

An important skill in the practice is learning how to do things more efficiently, to figure out where you're expending unnecessary energy. Then the meditation gets a lot easier.

This is what practice is all about. If you've ever learned how to play a musical instrument, you realize that this is a lot of what practice is in that skill as well. You do the same scales over and over and over again, and after a while you begin to realize that you're doing them in a clumsy way. There's a more efficient way of doing them, a smoother way of doing them. So it's not just the amount of time you put in it, but it's also the way you use your powers of observation to look for where there's unnecessary energy being expended, where you're taking on too many battles or trying to manage too many things all at once. What things do you not have to be responsible for?—things that you can just let go and they'll go away on their own.

As with the breath: Sometimes we feel we have to push and push and push the breath to get it to go through the body, but that's not breath you're pushing, you're pushing the blood. The flow of the breath energy through the body doesn't

involve any pushing at all. It's just a matter of relax, relax, relax, allow, allow, allow, as the breath comes in and the breath goes out. Try to catch and disperse areas in the body where you're tensing up even the least little bit around the breath.

The important principle here is that you learn how to be observant and how to ask the right questions. Sometimes being observant means observing the mind when it's not in good shape, where it's got a lot of things bubbling up—like Whack-A-Mole, with all of those little moles coming out of the holes. And then you realize: “Why do I have to play Whack-A-Mole?” Just walk away from the game. You stay with the breath channels of the body, you stay with whatever you find is a good vantage point. After a while, things will begin to calm down on their own, and you don't have to whack any of the moles at all.

Now, part of the mind may say, “This is being very irresponsible.” But meditation, like any battle, is a matter of learning how to choose your battles. What are the important battles to fight? Part of being a responsible warrior is realizing that some battles don't have to be fought. They're just a waste of energy. And in that way you can concentrate on the ones that really do matter. So keep watching.