

## *How to Read Yourself*

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One of the most necessary skills you have to develop as a meditator is learning how to read your own mind. Where is it right now? What shape is it in? What does it need? In Pali, this is called *attaññu*, having a sense of yourself. Often we're pretty bad at it. When things are going well, we get complacent. We think nothing can happen. The mind is progressing, and we start getting sloppy. When things are not going well, you can tell yourself that you have no good qualities at all. Everything is gone. Nothing's left over from your practice—which is not true. The qualities you've been developing may be eclipsed for the time being. But when your concentration is not going well, it's not the case that nothing else is going well.

When the Buddha talks about having a sense of yourself, it's learning how to read: How far have you come in different qualities of the mind? When you suddenly find that your concentration has trouble getting started and is waylaid by different hindrances, remind yourself that you have five strengths that you've been working on. Maybe right now the strength of concentration is weak, but look to see what else you've got in terms of your conviction, your persistence, your mindfulness, your discernment.

Ajaan Mun made a lot of the idea of using your discernment to develop your concentration. When Ajaan Lee wrote the book, *The Craft of the Heart*, which is one of the first books in the forest tradition, that was one of the things he singled out as being special about Ajaan Mun's teachings. The standard line that came out of Bangkok in the textbooks you'd read in those days was that first you had to get your virtue right, and then you could work on your concentration, and then you could work on your discernment. But Ajaan Mun had found that that approach doesn't work.

When he was starting out, lots of different concentration methods were being taught. There were the ones that would have you follow whatever vision came into your mind and see where it would lead you. But the visions could be endless, Ajaan Mun discovered. He realized, you can't just do concentration—you've got to use some discernment to remind yourself, "What is right view? What are we trying to do as we get the mind settled down? What are we after?" When you have a clear sense of where the concentration is supposed to go, then you can get on the right track. You can focus your mind in the right way.

Both Ajaan Lee and Ajaan Maha Boowa, when they wrote their books on meditation, would talk about using your discernment to get the mind willing to settle down. In fact, in Ajaan Maha Boowa's case, that was the name of the whole book: *Discernment Fosters Concentration*, pointing out that some people find it difficult to get their minds to settle down by just focusing on a meditation word, so they have to think their way to cut off all the various routes by which the mind would leave the present moment, to see that those things are not worth thinking about. All the places the mind could go would be subject to aging, illness, and death. They're inconstant, stressful, not-self. If the mind goes to the body, thinking thoughts of lust, thinking thoughts of pride around the body, you can do the contemplation of the 32 body parts to the point where all of the possible roads out of the present moment have been blocked. Then the mind will be willing to settle down.

Ajaan Lee talks about using your discernment to develop a sense of samvega, and then from the samvega to go into concentration.

So when your concentration seems to be a mess, start thinking in terms that would make the mind happy to settle down by using your discernment.

You can also use your conviction, thinking about the Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Sangha. In this case, the Buddha says, there are times when you to get the mind to stay with the breath but you run into a fever in the breath or a fever in your feelings, or a fever in the mind. In other words, the mind's not willing to stay. It feels antsy, irritable. That's when you have to stop and think about something inspiring: about what a wonderful teacher we have in the Buddha, for example. How many people do you know who had all his prospects for power, wealth, all the sensual pleasures you could imagine, and yet were willing to give them up the way he did? As so often happens with someone who's been indulging in pleasures like that, he first went to the other extreme of total self-denial. That didn't work. But he had the wisdom to see that there must be something else, another path. He was willing to give up the pride that went with his austerities. Then, as he got the mind into concentration, he began to gain knowledge. And again, he didn't get waylaid by his knowledge.

There were people in his time who, when they began to remember previous lifetimes, would set themselves up as teachers. They could see beings dying and being reborn, and they were ready to start teaching. But he realized that these knowledges weren't the end of the issue. There had to be something better. How could you use those knowledges, he said to himself, to find something of real value, something that wouldn't age, wouldn't grow old, wouldn't die? And he found it.

It was as if he had to go through an obstacle course and was able to avoid all the obstacles, and he came out victorious. Then he shared his teaching for free for more than 45 years. He walked all over northern India to teach whoever might be ready to learn. That's the teacher we have.

Or look at the Dhamma he taught. Look at the tradition of the noble Sangha. It's all very inspiring. Sometimes when your concentration is scattered, you might want to stop and think about a theme like this to get yourself inspired. If you're down on yourself, think about your own virtue, your own generosity. All of us here have practice in virtue, practice in generosity. We're all people of wealth: inner wealth, inner worth.

There's no need to get down on yourself. Just remind yourself that meditation does have its fallow periods. They usually come from a lack of heedfulness. You start getting sloppy, so the cure is to be meticulous. This is where you bring in your mindfulness, saying, "I'm just going to think about the breath, nothing else." If all the steps in Method Two seem to be a little bit too much, say, "I'll just do one step, just be with the breath. Let it be comfortable," and not ask any other questions of the mind, not make any more demands out of it.

So you look at the Buddha's list of five strengths, and you look at your own five strengths. When any one of them is weak, remind yourself that you do have your strong points. Learn how to bring them out and use them, because we're not only *reading* the mind. We're also writing its story. As someone once said, "If you don't like the news, go out and make some news of your own." If you don't like what you're reading in your mind, you can rewrite it.

We're not stuck with the mind as it is. We're not stuck with the body as it is. Both of them have their potentials. Think about Ajaan Lee as he discovered the different potentials of the breath, and from there the different potentials of the elements in the body, the properties in the body. As he said, there are lots of potentials in here that human beings for the most part don't take advantage of.

To take advantage of these things requires that you take an interest in what you've got here. If that interest is flagging, if there doesn't seem to be anything to the breath but in and out, ask yourself, "What are you missing? What are you not paying attention to?" Remind yourself of the example of the ajaans out in the forest, sometimes with a minimal amount of instruction. They were able to take that little bit of instruction and do something good with it, work out its implications, using it to read their own minds and to rewrite the story of their own minds—because that's what we're doing as we practice.

I talked to a Chinese astrologer one time, and he was saying he didn't like to do astrology for people who were practicing meditation because they weren't

simply following the path of least resistance. They were going against the stream, against whatever weaknesses they had in their stars. So it's good to think about that. We have potentials and we can make a lot out of them. Sometimes it's hard, but we can do hard things. After all, we're human beings. And although the example of a lot of the human beings around us is not all that inspiring, there are some who show that human beings can do something remarkable. But, as I said, one of the basic skills in becoming remarkable is learning how to read yourself, to use your strengths to make up for your weaknesses.

That way, as you continue to read yourself and rewrite the story, you finally get to the point where it's really good to read.