

There's Work to Be Done

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One of the customs of the noble ones is to delight in developing and to delight in letting go. Two activities. We're not just letting go. We have to develop something to hold on to first. You think of the image of the raft: First you have to bind the raft together, so that you have something to hold on to as you go across the flood. In this case, as we're meditating, we are letting go of a lot of things outside, but we have to have something good to hold on to inside. Otherwise, we just drift around.

So you choose one object, like the breath. Keep reminding yourself to stay here. The activity of mindfulness is not just being aware of things or accepting things. It means keeping something in mind, and there's actually quite a lot to keep in mind: first, the object you're going to stay with, and then learning how to recognize when you're doing it well and when you're not doing it well. This is a sensitivity you develop with time.

This is what makes meditation a skill, so that you're not coming to each present moment as a fresh moment. You're trying to remember what useful lessons you've learned from the past. When you're focusing on the breath, where is a good place to focus? There are instructions that tell you to try different spots in the body. You remember those, but you remember particularly the ones that you've tried and have worked in the past. Then you remember different ways of thinking about the breath. Ajaan Lee recommends thinking of the breath as a whole-body process involving all the nerves in the body, all the blood vessels in the body. So when you breathe in, the whole body is breathing in. When you breathe out, the whole body's breathing out. And you want to develop your awareness so it fills the body.

Then you watch the breath in that whole-body context. What kind of breathing feels good? It's good to start with some energizing breaths, long and deep. As long and deep breathing feels good, you keep it up. Then after a while, you let it calm down until things feel just right. Then you let that sense of "just right" spread through the body.

This is work you have to do. Ajaan Lee calls it "concentration work." Think of the different images that the Buddha gives for the different levels of right concentration. The one for the first jhana actually involves someone who's working: a bathman mixing water with bath powder to make a bath dough. In those days, they didn't have bars of soap. They had a soap powder that they mixed

with water to make a dough, and then you took that lump of dough and rubbed it over your body. The duty of the bathman was to mix it so it was just right: not too moist, not too dry, yet all the powder was moistened.

So you work on that. You want to have the breath and the sense of ease going through the body. Notice areas where the breath doesn't seem to be flowing well. How can you relax those areas so that it does flow well?

This is useful in lots of ways: To begin with, it helps you sit for long periods of time. If the blood and the breath are flowing through the body well, everything's nourished. You don't get numb. And when awareness is broad like this, it's very hard for it to go into the past or into the future. Even though there may be memories of the past, as when you're being mindful, still you don't go *into* those memories. You don't turn them into little states of becoming where you slip off and travel around the past for a while, or slip off and travel around the future. You stay right here. The fact that your awareness is so broad helps prevent it from shrinking down so that it can enter into one of your little thought worlds.

So there's work to be done, but it's good work—work with a sense of ease, a sense of well-being. Only when you've done this work can you then start letting go, first of the directed thought and evaluation. When the breath feels really good throughout the body, you realize you don't have to adjust it much anymore. You don't have to talk to yourself about it so much. You can just be with the perception of “breath, breath, breath”: breath coming in, breath going out, and that's it. That's all you need. And you can stay here.

But to get to that point, you've got to do the work. Otherwise, if you just stay with the breath, after a while you begin to lose focus. If you don't make the effort of developing a full-body awareness, it's very easy to lose focus and just blur out. This is a skill we're developing here. I wouldn't say all, but many of the Buddha's images for people who are meditating involve people with skills—cooks, carpenters, soldiers, archers—people who work to master their skills and are willing to do whatever work is required.

So we're not just letting go. Ajaan Fuang, my teacher, was never one to get involved in Dharma controversies. He just liked to talk about how to do the practice. But there were a couple comments that he made on controversial issues in Thailand: One, he said, was that the people who say the practice is just one of letting go, letting go are telling you only half of the story. The other half is that there are things you've got to develop, because when you let go, what happens? We can find a nice, relaxed, peaceful state of mind. But then if you just let go, let go, without developing the discernment to see what creates that peaceful state of mind, there's an awful lot you're going to miss.

There is the activity of discernment: It starts with the directed thought and evaluation, and it continues as you get the mind into deeper and deeper states of concentration. It's going to involve noticing what the mind is doing that's excessive, ferreting it out, and then dropping just that, without dropping everything. Some things you have to hold on to. Even in the state of nothingness, you have to hold on to the perception of nothingness. So you're not totally letting go. It's learning how to let go precisely that gets you into the deeper states of concentration. And that requires a lot of observation, a lot of experimentation to see what works.

So when things get really still, you don't just stay there. This relates to another controversy Ajaan Fuang mentioned one time. There was a teacher in one part of Thailand who was not a member of the forest tradition. He made a lot about the idea of what he called "temporary nibbana," when the mind just settles down and doesn't have any clear sense of "I" or "me" in there. He said, "That's it. That's a taste of temporary nirvana." But as Ajaan Fuang noted, the whole point of trying to go to nibbana is that it's not temporary. It's outside of space and time. How can it be temporary? These momentary states—even though they may be more than momentary—but these states of stillness that come and go, are just states of concentration. They're not fully purified. They're not fully analyzed. There's a lot more work that has to be done.

This relates to another issue about the whole question of the passage where the Buddha says that the mind is luminous and is defiled by visiting defilements. There are some people who would say, "That's it. The original state of the mind is luminous and it's pure. And we're getting back to its original state as we meditate." But as Ajaan Maha Boowa noted, the Buddha never said "pure." He just said "luminous." There are lots of luminous states of mind, none of which are awakening. And there's that question: If the mind was originally pure and yet it somehow got defiled, then once you purify it again, what's to keep it from getting defiled again?

In fact, Ajaan Maha Boowa identifies the luminosity with the ultimate defilement of the mind, which is ignorance. The Buddha himself talks about what he calls the ultimate mastery of concentration, which is when everything is luminous and white. He says, "But that, too, is inconstant. That, too, has an element of stress." So it's not awakening.

If you settle down in a luminous state of mind and say, "Well, this must be it," you're not doing enough work. You have to settle in and get very, very observant, very, very sensitive. Where is there still some inconstancy in there? Where is there still some stress? To what extent does the level of stress go up and down? When it

goes up and down, what did you do? When you notice that, though, that's when you can ask yourself, "How do I let go of this?" That requires more work, more directed thought, more evaluation. Then you can take that apart, and you find something that the Buddha calls "what you've never reached before, what you've never attained before, what you've never realized before." In other words, there's something totally new. You realize it's been there all along, but all the activity of the mind—even the luminosity of the mind—has obscured that. Although I have to say, "it's been there all along" is not quite right, because it actually is outside of space and time. There's no "there" there. It's something apart. And to get to that something apart requires some work.

Years back, I was reading a manuscript of a book saying that there are basically two approaches to the practice: One is that you have to create nibbāna as you meditate. The other is that you realize, "Nibbāna is always there. There's nothing to do. In fact, anything you might do will get in the way. So you simply relax, and there you are." The author had asked for some feedback, so I gave some feedback, which was, "There's actually a third alternative, which is that you don't create nibbāna—it's already there—but you're not going to get there simply by relaxing. There's work that has to be done." Ajaan Lee gives an analogy: He says it's like saying there's fresh water in salt water. But if you want to get the fresh water out, you don't just let the salt water sit, because the salt is not going to separate out on its own. You have to distill it, and the distilling is the effort.

So there's a lot we have to let go. But in order to let go, we have to do some work. Even though we may like the idea of simply letting go, letting go, letting go, we also have to learn how to want to do the work, to delight in doing the work, so that we can reach what we've never reached before, attain what we've never attained before, realize what we've never realized before. It's only then that our practice can be complete.