

Outside the Box

February 16, 2023

What are your expectations for the next hour? It's evening time. Some people find the evening to be the perfect time to meditate. Other people find it to be a hard time. Your energy level is down, and you start telling yourself, "Well, it's not going to be good tonight." You've got to watch out for that. Don't box yourself in. Allow yourself to think outside the box. Each meditation should be an exploration. What's the breath going to be like tonight? What's the shape of my mind going to be like tonight? What's it like right now? Take stock of it.

If you get a sense of where it's out of balance, remember that you have a whole range of tools to use to bring it into balance. You could stay with the breath. Or before you settle down with the breath, you might try something else: Try goodwill for all beings. You can start with goodwill for yourself and work out. Or start with goodwill outside and work back in.

Contemplate the bones in the body. Start with the tips of the fingers, the bones in the first joints. Where are they right now? All ten of them. Do you feel any tension around them? Relax the tension. Then go to the second joints, then the third. The bones in the palms—or you can view them as the bones at the back of the hand. Whichever side seems to hold more tension, relax the tension there. Work up through the wrist and up through the arms. When you hit the shoulders, then you start down at the toes. Come up through the legs, the spine, the skull.

There are lots of different topics you could focus on right now. As the Buddha said, there are times when you try to settle down with the body sitting right here, and there's a fever. It could be a fever in the mind, a fever in the body—not so much a physical fever, just an antsiness. Okay, what's the problem? What can you do to soothe the fever? He says to find a topic that you find inspiring. Think about that, and then eventually the mind will be able to settle down again, ready to be with the breath.

In other words, don't just give in to your preconceived notions. We live our lives so hemmed in. It's good to think about the Buddha having broken out. He had lots of expectations placed on him. He didn't meet his family's expectations at all. The Pali Canon doesn't tell many details about his going forth. The dramatic stories come in the later versions, but in the Pali Canon it's dramatic enough. It says he cut off his hair and shaved off his beard while his parents were crying, and then he left the house. He made a clean break.

Throughout the history of Buddhism, the people who really go for the Dhamma make a clean break. There's that story of Ajaan Singh, who was one of Ajaan Mun's first students. He'd been a Pali student, so after he started practicing with Ajaan Mun, he went back to see his Pali teacher and tried to get the teacher to go studying with Ajaan Mun as well. The teacher ended up throwing his spittoon at Ajaan Singh. Ajaan Singh was pretty plain spoken. But he didn't let that deter him. "Well, even if I can't get anyone else, *I'll* practice with Ajaan Mun. I'll go back and practice some more myself."

Think of all the ajaans in the forest tradition and what was expected of them: sons of peasants, expected to just to stay there, till the land, and be poor. Looking at them from the outside, you wouldn't expect that they'd be able to attain the noble attainments. But they didn't let outside expectations keep them down. They didn't internalize those outside expectations.

Ajaan Mun had to fight against some of those outside expectations. When he was teaching his students, he said, "Look, you have everything that's needed." These people were told that they just didn't have it in them to get ahead in life, but he said, "You have it within you: all you need to gain the noble attainments. You've got a body sitting here. You've got a mind that's mindful and alert. It may not be perfectly mindful or perfectly alert, but you've got the seeds of those qualities. You realize that you're suffering and you're looking for a way out. That's enough."

The ajaans have an interesting combination of strong faith in the Buddha and very curious inquisitive minds. They didn't go for a meditation technique that simply programmed them. They questioned things, and Ajaan Mun encouraged them to question things.

This, of course, this is in line with the Buddha's teaching on questioning the texts, questioning the teacher. Just because a teacher says something, it's not necessarily true. Just because the texts say something, it's not necessarily true. I remember when Ajaan Suwat came out of his coma, he mentioned that he had had a dream where the Buddha was meeting with a lot of arahants, and they were going over to the Pali Canon, determining which parts were authentic and which ones were not. When he told this to people after he came out of the coma, nobody batted an eye. It wasn't considered outrageous to question the Canon.

And you find the teachers coming up with original teachings on, say, the three characteristics. Ajaan Chah would note that inconstant things do have their constant side. They all fall constantly under their pattern of dependent co-arising. They constantly fall under the truths of the four noble truths. That's what's constant about them.

Ajaan Lee had his own way—in fact, two different ways—of dealing with the three characteristics. One is that he noticed certain aspects of your body stay the same. Your mouth has never turned into your eye. Your hands have never turned into your feet. There are certain things that are constant. But that doesn't mean they should be clung to. He goes on to point out that when you're practicing concentration, you're taking these inconstant aggregates—body, feelings, perceptions, fabrications, and consciousness—and you're trying to make them as constant as possible. You see that they do have their constant side. These things that are stressful do have their pleasant side. You can create a sense of ease in concentration, a strong well-being, out of what? Out of these five aggregates. And you can exert some control over them. That's the primary characteristic of self.

The Buddha points this out in his second sermon: It's because we don't have total control over these things that we can't really say that they're ours. But we do have some control. Yet even though we have some measure of control over these things, it's no reason to cling to them. As Ajaan Lee pointed out, when you find things that are constant and easeful and under your control, you realize that they too should be abandoned. Otherwise, you're holding yourself back.

The ajaans had strong faith in the Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Sangha. And a lot of it came from their experience out in the woods. You're out there alone with no protection. The only thing in between you and the wilderness when you're sitting in meditation is your mosquito net. That's not much. So where is your protection? It's in your confidence that you're doing something good. It's in your confidence in the Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Sangha. You find that as you put that to the test again and again and again, you get more and more genuine sense of refuge in these things. But at the same time, you're allowed to be inquisitive. The Buddha himself encouraged it. The ajaans encouraged it. They themselves were questioning things, and they were encouraged to question. In fact, Ajaan Maha Boowa would tell his students, "Try to prove the Buddha wrong." So they thought for themselves.

This means that the meditation they teach is not an indoctrination. You're not told that if you see that there is no self, then you've gained awakening. Anybody can force him or herself to contemplate things until they decide, yes, there is no self—because they believe there's a reward that comes with that. But as the ajaans said, you're not here for anybody else's reward or anybody else's certification. You're here because you're suffering. You want to put end to suffering, so you're inquisitive.

If you're not inquisitive and you simply say, "Okay, I'll apply these perceptions of inconstancy, stress, and not self to whatever comes up," how do you know that

you're not indoctrinating yourself? You've inclined the mind to see things in that way. Does that mean they truly are that way? It's only when you flip things around that you can test them, to see to what extent these things are true, to what extent they're not.

The Buddha himself treated the three perceptions as teachings that are always true but not always beneficial. There's that story about the monk who, hearing the Buddha say that all the aggregates are not self, asked, "Well, if the aggregates are not self, then what self is going to be affected by things that are done by not self?" You can see where his thinking is leading: There's nobody there to be responsible for the actions, there's nobody to be affected by the actions, so you can do what you want. The Buddha called him out on this. The monk was thinking he could slip past the genuine use of these teachings, which was to help you let go of your clinging.

There was another case where a very junior monk was asked by a wanderer, "What is the result of action?" The monk said, "The result of action is pain," which was very much the Nigantha teaching at that time. The wanderer responded, "I've never heard any Buddhist monks say anything like this. You'd better go back and check it with the Buddha." So the junior monk goes to see Ven. Ananda, and Ananda takes him to see the Buddha. The Buddha basically says, when you're asked about action, that's not the time to be talking about inconstancy of all feelings, the stresses of all feelings. It's the time to talk about how some feelings are pleasurable, some are neutral, and some are painful. The purpose of the teaching at that point, when you're talking about kamma, is to try to induce people to do skillful things. If you say, "Everything you do is going to lead to pain," why bother trying to be skillful?

So these perceptions are not always useful. It's through trial and error that you figure out where they're best used, how they're used, to what extent they're true. But as Ajaan Lee points out, ultimately everything has to get put aside. That's his interpretation of the phrase, *Sabbe dhamma anatta*: All dhammas are not self. Even your right views you have to put aside at some point.

So these are people who have thought outside the box. It's not that we're practicing here to attain right view, which is something that a lot of scholars will say. Right view is not the end. It's a means. It's part of the raft that you ultimately have to let go of. In the mean time, you test it. It's in the testing that you develop your own sensitivity, and it's through your own sensitivity that you see where you're causing yourself stress and suffering and how you can stop.

Notice that when the Buddha taught the wings to awakening—which he said were the teachings that all his followers should agree on—they're almost all

qualities of the mind. In other words, he didn't say you have to have this or that belief about this or that. The one object of belief was about the Buddha's awakening, which comes down to a belief in the power of your actions. Everything else in the wings consists of qualities of mind that you need to bring to your actions—and that includes having an inquisitive mind. You need to be honest and observant, so you have to develop those two qualities in spades. As you do that, you can't allow yourself to be hemmed in by your preconceived notions. You have to be willing to question things.

So what limitations are there on your practice tonight? Make sure you're not the one putting them there. You can use your imagination to help you. Imagine that this is going to be a good session. Then you reflect on how the imagination on its own isn't going to do it, but at least it opens up possibilities and reminds you that things may turn out differently than you might expect. So imagine them turning out well. And then from that, do what you can to *make* them turn out well. Show some ingenuity in your meditation. We're not just putting the mind through the meat grinder here. We're here to explore. See what you can find.