

## *Simple & Basic*

*May 1, 2004*

Try to keep things simple as you meditate. Pare everything down into very simple steps.

You're going to stay with the breath. The mind wanders off: Bring it back. Wanders off again, bring it back again. Make the breath comfortable. See if making the breath comfortable makes it easier to stay. This is all pretty basic stuff, but there's a lot there.

When the mind wanders off and you're bringing it back, all the factors of dependent co-arising are in there—if you want to look for them. When the mind *is* with the breath, it's with all the sankharas: bodily fabrication, verbal fabrication, mental fabrication. They're all right here. So everything you really need to know is happening right here. It's simply a matter of looking very carefully, and it's easiest to look when you keep things simple. The more you clutter up your meditation with other ideas, the less you can see.

We talked the other day about respect for concentration. This is a very important principle, because it means sticking with the mind when it's very quiet: having a sense of the importance of that quietness, that stillness, so that you don't easily throw it away. And particularly you'll find that when the defilements come on strong—the opinions that are bound up with greed, anger, and delusion, or passion, aversion, and delusion—they'll have a tendency to push good things out of their way. And one of the first thing that gets stomped on is any state of stillness in the mind. We think it's stupid: “What can you possibly learn by being still? My opinions are more interesting and intelligent.”

But the real problem is those opinions based on greed, anger, and delusion: *They're* the ignorance. Genuine knowledge starts with that very simple awareness that stays with the breath: That's what you want to expand on.

So you have to protect it, you have to value it, you have to see its importance. Sometimes we get complacent about it: The mind tends to settle down and the next time it settles down again and settles down again and you begin to think you've got it mastered. And you start getting lazy, you start getting complacent, you don't look very carefully at what you're doing. The stillness may continue to last for a while, but there will come a point where things start to unravel. And often once they've unraveled it's very hard to weave them back together again.

So as the Buddha says, be heedful. Respect your concentration. That respect leads to having a respect for everything that surrounds the concentration: looking into what keeps the mind steady, what keeps the mind stable, and

trying to get really, really good at it. Because the more precise you are in seeing what's going on while you're looking after what's going on, the more precisely you'll see other things that are worth seeing right there.

So, keep things simple: Your awareness. The breath. Being mindful of the breath. Being alert to the breath. As Ajaan Lee says, everything comes out of this. Even knowledge and vision of release: He says that the knowledge is a strengthened form of mindfulness; the vision, a strengthened form of alertness. These two qualities are the starting point for everything else.

The basic Dhamma textbook that's used to teach monks and novices in Thailand is made out of lists, starting with lists of twos, lists of threes, fours, fives. And the very first list, in the list of twos, is two qualities that are very helpful everywhere: mindfulness and alertness. They're very necessary and very basic.

And yet we're taking these basic qualities and developing them until they turn into something transcendent. And they help us see the transcendent. Or as Ajaan Lee once said, where did the Buddha gain awakening? Right at the tip of his nose. It's all right here, it's just that we haven't sorted things out clearly enough. We haven't looked carefully enough.

So one of the purposes of concentration practice is to get you to look very, very carefully, not to slough over any of the details. Sometimes you find in the course of the meditation that anger arises. It can sometimes even seem that anger arises more easily after the mind has been concentrated for a while. You find yourself getting upset about over what this person does, what that person does, because it's not quite right. Well, realize that it's because you're not looking carefully enough at your *own* actions, your own meditation. You begin to take things for granted. So keep looking back: What are you doing that's not as careful as it should be, careful as it could be, not as precise as it could be? Have you really looked into the breath? Is it really as comfortable as you can make it?

As Ajaan Fuang once said, you have to be crazy about the meditation, you have to be crazy about the concentration for you to get really good at it. It has to be the sort of thing you want to do in every spare moment. It has to capture your imagination.

So you try to find ways of keeping the mind still in all kinds of unusual circumstances: when you're at work, when you're driving—every aspect of life. See if you can keep the mind centered no matter what you do, no matter what's going on around you. Make it your sport.

When you can do this, you've got all the bases for success right there. It's something you *like* to do because it captures your imagination. You stick with it; you try to find ways of keeping the mind centered in all circumstances: That's persistence. Then there's intentness, looking very, very carefully at what

you're doing, not sloughing over the details. And then finally, powers of analysis: checking up on how things are going with a very clear sense of what counts as skillful and what doesn't. Work on these things—keep it basic—these four bases of success, and you find the practice goes a lot more smoothly, the results come a lot more quickly, and at the same time they're a lot more solid.

It's when we let things get abstract, when we start dealing in theories that complicate matters, that's when we don't see. It's like smoke: Ajaan Lee has that nice image of a person building a fire and creating a lot of smoke. The person thinks "Well, there's light in the fire," but actually it's creating more smoke than light. You want your awareness to be like a clean burning flame that produces no smoke at all, and that's best done when you keep things simple, keep things right at the basics.

The breath. Your awareness right here in the present moment. Your intention to stay here. When you keep it basic, keep it simple, keep it down to earth like this, everything becomes very clear.