

Put Your Books Back on the Shelf

February 2, 2017

They say that there are 84,000 parts in the Pali Canon. How they count a part, I don't know. The point is, there's a lot. But, as the ajaans like to say, it all comes down to one mind. The mind has lots of different defilements, lots of different tricks. There's one of the passages in the Canon where an elephant trainer says that, when dealing with an elephant, within a week you know all of the elephant's tricks it would try to play to avoid being trained. But with a human being, the problem is that human beings are hard to read.

So we've got this complicated mind that we ourselves can't read. So there are 84,000 different teachings to help us deal with our 84,000 complications. But when you're sitting down to meditate, you want to simplify things as much as you can. Bring everything down to one: being with one object right here, right now. There's not that much you have to keep in mind. There are the four noble truths. Each of them has a duty. Your duty right now is to develop the path. The path is going to be your breath: the mind with the breath. That's all you have to pay attention to.

Now, it may happen that problems come up in the meditation. You remember something you've read that will help, but for the most part, try to file it away. Or as Ajaan Mun used to say, put it in the cabinet. All the books you've read, put them back in the cabinet. Put them back on the shelf. Just be with your breath. Get to know the mind with the breath right here, right now, with as little interference as possible from what you may have read. When something comes up in the meditation and you wonder what it is, after the meditation you can go and find some reference to it. But don't let the books run your practice. You want the breath and the mind in the present moment to run your practice, because that's where the real problems are.

The problems are not in the books. The problems are here. One, how to get the mind to be with the breath. Two, how to think about the breath in a way that helps you to settle down. And the more you can bring your own ingenuity to this, the better. As for what the next step is going to be, there's no need to know. Work on this step. Give it your full attention.

Luang Phaw Phut, one of the famous ajaans in Thailand, was a student of Ajaan Sao, who was Ajaan's Mun's teacher. Ajaan Sao didn't have that many students. Luang Phaw Phut was saying that when people would come to meditate with Ajaan Sao, he'd say, "Okay, repeat *Buddho* or focus on the breath." And

they'd ask him, "What is going to happen when I do this?" And he'd say, "Don't ask. Just do it." "What does *Buddho* mean?" "Don't ask, just repeat it." Whatever questions, "Don't ask. Just do the practice." Then after they'd done it, they'd come back. They'd have this problem or that problem and he'd tell them, "Okay. That's right. Or that's wrong." He'd tell them how to solve the problem facing them, but wouldn't tell them much beyond that.

Ajaan Fuang was much the same sort of teacher. When people came to practice with him, he'd hand them the seven steps in Ajaan Lee's "Method Two." After they'd read that, he'd say, "Okay, put it aside. Now focus on your breath." As for what would happen, it would be a very individual matter. He would tell people not to worry about what was going to happen.

The real question is, What's happening right now? Give it your full attention. If you spend too much time glancing down the path, you don't look at where you're stepping. You may be stepping on something important. These little plants that are coming up on the path: Some of them are weeds, and it's okay to step on them, but some of them are potentially trees, something with flowers, fruits, or shade they can offer. So you want to be careful how you step.

So with each breath, pay attention to that breath. When you find that you can stay with the breath comfortably and things feel good, then you can put aside all the directed thought and evaluation, the chatter about the breath. Just be with the breath. And at this point, you don't have to make any comments on it at all, aside from just, "Breath, breath, breath."

I remember one time—when I was practicing with Ajaan Fuang and I was going on almsround, just "breath, breath, breath"—and something in my mind said, "This is dumb. You're not showing any intelligence at all." And then I realized, "Why do I have to be intelligent, commenting on the breath? What's there to be original about being in concentration?" Ajaan Lee would often say, "There are times when you have to be willing to be stupid." In other words, you don't have to have a clever comment on what you're doing right now. Just be with what you're doing. Be with the sensation. Learn how to make that a skill.

There's a skill to learn how not to talk to yourself and yet still be alert. It's a good skill to have. It's like when I was learning Thai boxing, back when I was a lay person. The very first thing they taught was how to get out of a clench. In other words, your opponent's coming at you. How do you back off so as not to expose yourself? The same thing is going to happen when things come up in the mind. Sometimes you're not ready for them. You're not ready to deal with them. So you've got to back off. You've just got to go back into the concentration. You

want to have this safe place. So make it solid. Make this a skill that you really know how to do.

Think of those Harmoniums of Mercury in the book, *The Sirens of Titan*. They don't have much to say, just "Here I am. Here I am. Here I am. So glad you are. So glad you are. So glad you are." That's all the conversation is. But they're very happy, because they're not feeding off of one another. They're feeding off the vibrations of the planet, an unlimited food supply. And the same can happen in your meditation. When you finally settle down, the breath is comfortable, and you learn how to maintain that without worrying about sounding intelligent to anybody else. You've got your harmless food supply inside.

You don't have to record your great insights. In fact, a lot of great insights are things you have to be afraid of, because you can misuse them. You suddenly decide that your meditation experience confirms what you've read. Watch out for that. So always be ready to pull out of the difficult situations and just be still. Focus on one thing. Bring everything right here. And don't be afraid that you're going to be dumb. The real insights come when you're fully here and noticing what's going on on its own terms.

Now, learning *is* a treasure, and it's good to have some background, at the very least, in the basic steps of the path: the basic steps of the meditation. But don't let your learning clutter things up. Don't think that you need to have it all at your fingertips all the time. Otherwise, you're going to be like the proverbial lady in the Thai saying: the old lady who carries around a big bale of straw all the time. She knows that she may need a bale of straw someday, so she's got it on her back all the time. Don't carry your learning around in that way. Put it back in the cabinet so that you can give your full attention to the breath.

This quality of intentness, *citta* in Pali, is one of the foundations of right effort. And it's one of the bases of success, or the bases of power, that lead you to concentration. The more you can give your full attention right here to this one thing, the greater your skill and the more you're going to come to know things that are not in books. After all, nobody has ever been able to catch nibbana and put it in a book. All we have are pointers. But what you want here is the real thing. This is where it's going to be found. So keep watching it right here. And as you get more familiar with this place, the more you'll see.