

Maintenance Work

December, 2002 - Ven. Thanissaro Bhikkhu

Get your body into position. Sit straight, hands on your lap. Close your eyes.

Get your mind in position. Think about the breath and be aware of the sensation of the breathing.

See? It's not all that hard. Just *doing* it is not the hard part. The hard part is the maintaining: keeping it there. That's because the mind isn't used to staying in position, just as the body isn't used to staying in position. But the mind tends to move a lot faster and to be a lot more fickle than the body, which is why we have to work extra hard at that really hard aspect of the training: keeping the mind in one place, maintaining it in concentration.

Ajaan Lee once said there are three steps in concentration practice: doing, maintaining, and then using the concentration. The using is fun. Once the mind has settled down, you can use it as a basis for understanding things. You suddenly see the motions of the mind as it creates thoughts, and it's a fascinating process to watch, to take apart.

The maintaining, though, isn't all that fascinating. You learn a lot of good lessons about the mind in the course of maintaining, and without those lessons you couldn't do the more refined work of gaining insight. But still, it's the most difficult part of the practice. Ajaan Lee once compared it to putting a bridge across a river. The pilings on this bank and that bank aren't hard to place, but the pilings in the middle are really hard. You've got to withstand the current of the river. You dig down and put a few stones on the bottom of the river and you come back with your next load of stones only to discover that the first load of stones has washed away. This is why you need techniques for getting that middle set of pilings to stay in place, for otherwise the bridge will never get across the river at all.

So this is what we work at. In the beginning, the work is simply a question of noticing when the mind has slipped off and bringing it back. When it's slipped off again, you bring it back again. And again. And again. But if you're observant, you become sensitive to the signs that tell you when the mind is about to slip off. It hasn't gone yet but it's getting ready to go. It's tensed up and

ready to jump. When you can sense that tension, you simply relax it. Meticulously. And that way you can keep the mind more and more consistently with the breath.

Be especially careful not to ask where the mind was going to jump. You can't give into that temptation. Sometimes the mind is getting ready to jump off to something and you wonder, "Where is it going? Anyplace interesting?" Or when a thought begins to form: It's just a vague, inchoate sense of a thought, and the mind puts a label on it. Then you want to see, "Does this label really fit?" And that means you're fully entangled. If you look more carefully at the process of what's happening, you begin to realize that whether the label fits or not, the mind has a tendency to make it fit. So it's not a question of whether it's a true label or not, but whether you want to follow through with that process of making it fit. And you don't have to. You notice a little stirring in the mind, and you don't have to label it. Or if you've labeled it, you don't have to ask whether the label is true or not. Just let it go. That way the stirring can disband.

Now, when the mind finally *does* settle down, in the beginning there can be a sense of rapture, a sense of accomplishment, that you've finally gotten the mind to stay with the breath for long periods of time, for longer and longer periods of time. It feels really refreshing to be there. Then you make it a game, seeing how quickly you can get there, how often you can get there, what other activities you can be doing at the same time. However — and I don't want to spoil it for you — there comes a time when this gets boring, too.

It's boring, though, only because you lose perspective. Everything seems so calm, everything seems so settled, and there's a part of the mind that gets bored. Oftentimes that's your first object lesson in insight: Look into the boredom. Why is the mind bored with a state of calm and ease? After all, the mind is in its most secure place, its most comfortable place. Why would part of you want to go looking for trouble, to stir things up? Look into that. There's a chance for insight right there.

Or, you start telling yourself, "This is really stupid, just sitting here still, still, calm, calm. This isn't intelligent at all." That's when you have to remind yourself that you're working on a foundation. The stronger the foundation, then when the time comes to build a building, the taller it can go, the more stable it will be. When insights come, you want them to be solid insights. You don't want them to knock you askew. How can insights knock you askew? You gain an insight and get so excited about it that you lose perspective, forget to take it and look on the other side. When an insight comes, Ajaan Lee always recommends turning it inside out. The insight says, "This must be this." Well, he says, try thinking

about what if it were *not* this. What if it were the opposite? Would there be a lesson there as well? In other words, just as you're not supposed to fall for the content of your thoughts, you're not supposed to fall for the contents of your insights, either.

That requires really stable concentration, because many times when the insights come they're very striking, very interesting. A strong sense of accomplishment comes with them. To keep yourself from getting carried away by that sense of accomplishment, you want to have your concentration really solid so that it's not impressed. It's not bowled over. It's ready to look at the other side of the insight. This is one reason why you need solid concentration, to work at the steady, steady job of just coming back, staying, staying, keeping it still, keeping it still.

Then that old question of perception begins coming up again. The whole perception of your state of mind starts getting questionable. File that one away for future reference. As the Buddha said, all the states of concentration, all the states of jhana, up through the state of nothingness, are perception-attainments. The perception you apply to them is what keeps them going. And as you stay with a particular level, there starts to be a slight sense of the artificiality of the corresponding perception. But wait until the concentration is really solid before you start questioning it, for the perception is what keeps the state of concentration going — and it *is* an artificial state that you're creating in the mind. When the time comes for insight, one of the topics that you'll want to focus on is the artificiality of that concept, the artificiality of the perception that creates the state of concentration you've been living with. For the time being, though, just file it away for future reference. If you question things too early, everything gets short-circuited, and you're back to where you started.

So even though the work of maintaining concentration may seem like drudgery work — just coming back, coming back, coming back — everything depends on this quality of consistency, of maintenance. Get really good at it, really familiar with it. The more familiar you are with it, the more easily you can use it as the basis for insight when the time comes.

There's a passage where the Buddha talks about a meditator whose mind has attained a really solid stage of equanimity. When you're solid in your equanimity, you realize that you can apply it to different things. You can apply it to the sense of infinite space. You can apply it to the sense of infinite consciousness or nothingness. Once you recognize precisely where those perceptions are, precisely how you can focus on them and stay there for long, long times, you'll suddenly gain insight into how constructed they are.

In the beginning it's very obvious how constructed they are because you're working so hard to put them together. But as you get more and more familiar with them, there's a greater sense that you're simply tuning-in to something already there. You're more impressed by the "already-there-ness" of the state. You begin to overlook the act of tuning-in because it gets easier and easier, more and more natural — but it's still there, the element of construction, the element of fabrication that keeps you there. When the concentration gets really solid so that you can look into it even in its most refined state, that's when the insight really hits you: how constructed this is, how artificial the whole thing is — this state you've learned to depend on. And only then is the insight meaningful.

If you start analyzing states of concentration in terms of the three characteristics before you've really depended on those states, before you've really gotten familiar with them, it short-circuits the whole process. "Oh yes, concentration is unstable." Well, anyone can sit and meditate for two minutes and learn that, and it doesn't mean very much. But if you develop the skill so that you're really solidly with it, you test that principle of inconstancy. How constant can you make this state of the mind? Ultimately, you get to the point where you realize that you've made it as constant as you could ever make it, as reliable as you could ever make it, and yet it still falls under the three characteristics. It's still constructed.

That's when the mind starts tending toward the unconstructed, the unfabricated. If you've brought the mind to still enough a state of equilibrium, you can stop fabricating and things open up. It's not just an intention of saying, "Well, I'm going to put a stop to this." It's a matter of learning how equilibrium happens without any new intention taking its place. That's where the real skill lies. That's why we spend so much time getting the mind into balance, balance, balance, for only in a real state of balance like that can you totally let go.

Some people have the conception that meditation is about getting the mind into a really extreme state where things "break through." Bring it to the total edge of instability and then suddenly you break through to something deeper. That's what they say. But I've yet to find the Buddha describe it that way. For him it's more a question of bringing the mind to a state of balance so that when the time comes to stop fabricating, the mind doesn't tip over in any direction at all. It's right there.

So these qualities of consistency, persistence, stick-to-it-iveness, training the mind so it can really trust itself, depend on itself, rely on itself in the midst of all the inconstancy in the world: These are the qualities that make all the

difference in the meditation.