

## **Meditative Story Transcript – Meditation #2**

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**ROHAN GUNATILLAKE:** Hi there, it's Rohan here. How's it going?

And you probably don't know, but when I'm not doing this, or being jumped on by small humans around the house, I work for the National Health Service here in Scotland.

And since the new year I've been part of a large group of people working on rolling out the Covid-19 vaccination programme. And it's been pretty all-consuming.

So while a meditation on the theme of vaccinations might sound a bit of a stretch, hear me out.

It's been making me think about the times in my own meditation training when the injection of just a tiny bit of wisdom from a teacher gave me a level of strength and resilience that changed how I am in the world.

Injections of wisdom that at the time were such that I hardly felt them, but went onto have a massive impact on me all the same.

There's a lovely Scottish word for an injection which is: "jag." And there are three wisdom jags that I want to tell you about in this special episode of Meditative Story. It will be just me and you for the next 15 minutes or so.

First, follow me to a quiet Buddhist monastery a few hours south east of Bangkok.

It's hot. And I'm waiting in the open-sided sala or hall to meet the abbot of the monastery. And in a place like this, the abbot is not only the senior teacher, and figurehead, he basically runs the place. I've just dumped my bag in the guest quarters which I'm sharing with two refreshingly chatty Thai guys and I'm enjoying the rest after a busy bus ride here.

The buzzing of the insects seem to go well with the bright sunshine, and their flitting around my face is no longer a nuisance. I'm 27 and four months into a six-month-long sabbatical I've taken from work to train with a series of different meditation teachers across Sri Lanka, Thailand, and Myanmar, and I've got used to what it's like to do serious meditation in Asia.

A small energetic man starts beaming and waving frantically at me from across the hall, and I realise it's the abbot. My favorite teachers are those who surprise you with their exuberance and humour. Ajahn Anan has those qualities in spades, and he starts rattling off excitedly to me in Thai and showing me a beautiful figurine he's been helping paint. I don't know what he's saying, but I nod all the same, and we go and sit down, with his attendant and translator so we can meet properly.

Ajahn Anan (Ajahn means senior teacher in the Thai Buddhist tradition) is one of the youngest direct students of a great Thai meditation master who's had a big influence on modern meditation around the world.

And I'm a bit worried as I sit, legs respectfully behind me for my audience. The style they teach here in Wat Marp Jan is really quite hardcore. Old-school Buddhist monastic practices based on levels of deep, deep concentration that I've never had access to. So as I explain the various techniques I'm practicing and how they're going, I'm genuinely worried he's going to call me out for being a bit of an amateur. For not being so deep. I'm ready for some tough love. Instead, I get a wisdom jag.

"You live in a city. And you meditate like you live in a city. That's good. I live here, in the forest. So I teach meditation that is good for the forest. Your way and my way are different. But they end up in the same place. And you are making progress."

Like all wisdom jags, while I feel it at the time, I don't realise the impact of Ajahn Anan's words till later.

Practice in a way that makes sense for the environment where you are. Don't resent how busy your life is. Embrace it and make that busyness, what your life is really like – not what you think it should be like – make it the foundation of your practice.

Anan helps me move past the idea that I need the right conditions to be in place before I can meditate and make progress. He gives me the confidence that the best place to practice is where you actually are. And the best things to work with are what is around you.

So wherever you are now, this is the best place to meditate.

However your body feels, this is your best foundation.

And however crowded or full of mental momentum of the day your mind may be, this is your best tool.

Eyes open or closed, whichever is best for you, enjoying the warmth or cool of the air on your skin.

Knowing the body as it is, being honest with it and it being honest with you, revealing its tightness and also its calm.

And interested in what kind of mindstate or mood, life has dealt you just for now.

Knowing it, saying hello.

There are no more perfect conditions for making progress in meditation than this.

We practice where we are.

We start where we are.

We make progress where we are.

Earlier on in that same six-month meditation sabbatical, I'm staying at a retreat center in Sri Lanka.

We're in the hills, in tea country and it's such a treat that, named on the daily schedule is Nature Meditation where we're invited to sit outside as the sun comes down and rest our mind into the long views.

I settle into the rhythm of the place with a fun crew of meditators from across the world, and it's a few days in when I get to have what's called an interview with the teacher.

He asks me how my practice is and I tell him about how I'm doing a technique based on focusing on the breath but most sessions after a while the breath drops away and my mind opens out much wider, a much more spacious awareness.

He smiles. And administers wisdom jag number two.

"When you make meditation all about the breath, you make the breath special. When the breath is special, everything that is not the breath is not special. What you are describing is everything becoming special."

I love that. The idea of including everything in our meditation and as such making it all special.

Let's get a sense of that. Here's five seconds of silence as we try this together.

Start with the breath. Dropping as much of our awareness into the sensations of breathing.

Resting with the breath and when the mind slips away, just bringing it back again.

Resting with breathing.

And when the mind slips away, bringing it back, resetting.

Now dropping the breath.

And inviting your awareness to open out.

Including everything.

Whatever arises, is special.

Everything special.

Feeling, if you can, the spaciousness of that, and the instinct, the gravity of the mind towards that spaciousness.

Everything special.

Everything.

One more place to go here. Stay with me. This time in the UK at a wonderful center in the English countryside called Gaia House. I'm 25 or so I think and have been into meditation for a couple of years.

The retreat has a simple schedule, instructions in the morning all together in the main hall, then alternating periods of sitting and walking meditation, meals of course, concluding with a talk from the teachers in the primetime evening slot, and a meditation afterwards.

Christina Feldman, one of the founders of Gaia House, is teaching on the retreat, and she asks to see me one afternoon. It's a silent retreat so all communication is via very polite notes on a pinboard. A folded scrap of paper with your name on. And asked to see this teacher you admire so much. The height of excitement in a week of no devices or chatter.

Christina's jag is different in that it's not a wisdom drop, instead it's something she asks me to do. She asks me to host the closing meditation. Which means the teachers won't be in the room so it'll be my job to sit up top, face the room and ring the bell when the forty-five minutes is up.

As I sit down to start off, there is real fear. But when I look up and see everyone there, all of you there, something clicks in. There is a calm. Yes the hall is quiet, just the shuffling of people adjusting their cushions, the occasional throat cleared. But it's more than that.

I remember what I'm wearing. Beige slightly baggy trousers and a jumper with fun colourful stripes. Those clothes are long gone, but I love them still. They're what I wear when I sit up top for the first time. When I'm offered responsibility to represent the hall for the hall. It's when I first get to hold the space and ring the bell.