NR Ingenuity

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We have noticed that there’s no one Thai force meditation technique. You read of John Lee, there’s one technique, you read of John Mahambu and John Chang and John Tate, they all have different ways of explaining meditation and the techniques and strategies you use. That can be traced back to the way John Mun taught. As John Mahambu once said, when Ajahn Mun would give a Dhammacak, he would give the trunk of the tree, and as for the branches, that was up to you to figure out. He wasn’t being coy or incommunicative, but he knew it was an important principle in the practice that you have to learn to use your own ingenuity when confronted with a problem. It’s useful to know techniques that have worked for other people in the past, but you can’t simply let the technique do all the work without your gauging its results, to see if it works and see where it doesn’t work for you, and if it doesn’t work, what you can figure out in its place. As Ajahn Mun once said, “If I explain everything to you, it’s like you become used to getting handed to you on a platter, and then when the time comes to grow your own food and fix your own food, you won’t know what to do.” As Ajahn Fuang would say when he would teach, “Be observant.” That was his most frequent piece of instruction, but right there along with it was his injunction to use your ingenuity. In other words, when you’re faced with a problem, try the solutions that you’ve heard from other people to see if they work. And if they don’t, try to figure out why not, and try to come up with alternatives. It’s not the case that anything could possibly work. There are things that will work and things that will not work at all. But even though our minds have the same general problems, precise ins and outs of one case of greed, say, might be different from other cases of greed or other cases of anger. It’s not the case that every time you feel greed it’s the same issue, every time you feel anger it’s the same issue. There are going to be variations, there are going to be differences. Or when you’re dealing with pain, some techniques will work today and they won’t work tomorrow. So you have to learn how to think up new techniques. For instance, one day breathing through the pain will actually make it go away. Tomorrow you breathe through the pain and it’s still there, it won’t go away. Then you realize it’s not a question of the breath, it’s more a question of how you’re perceiving the pain. And this gets into an area that’s very subtle and pre-verbal, which is another reason why it’s difficult to explain techniques. Because your relationship with pain is often pre-verbal. Your first experiences of pain are your first experiences in dealing with pain. It happened back before you knew anything about language at all. Then you have some instinctive feelings and instinctive assumptions you make about the pain that you haven’t really examined. And if you tried to put them into words they would sound very strange. But you can try some techniques to question your perceptions. One technique is to try to notice where is the pain sharpest at any given moment. Does it stay in the same place or does it move around? Does it stay in the same intensity or does the intensity vary? If the intensity varies, that’s a sign that the cause is varying as well. Is the cause physical or is it mental? So when there’s a variation in the pain, in the sharpest sensation of pain, I say, “Well, what variations happen in the mind?” What changed? And you begin, usually it’ll be an issue of perception, the mental label, the mental picture you apply to the pain. How does the mind communicate to itself that there’s a pain? What does it say about the pain? There’s that famous image in one of Ajahn Chah’s talks about how the mind settles down, it’s like a clear pool of water, and all sorts of wonderful animals will come around. Well, not all the animals are wonderful. When you focus on the pain, you begin to see all your weird ideas about pain come gathering around as well. But it’s a great place to look for them. It’s as if you’re going to shoot a documentary about the animals and the pain. Wilds of Africa, down in the savannah. And if you want to see the animals, you don’t go wandering all over the savannah. You find a watering hole, because you know the animals will have to come to the watering hole at some time during the day. So you just set up your camera there and wait. And it’s the same with pain. You stay with the pain. Once the mind is concentrated enough and solid enough that you can look at the pain and see what comes up, if you’re feeling too oppressed by the pain, you might ask yourself, “Is the pain coming at you, or is it going away from you?” Our common perception is that it’s coming at you, and you’re on the receiving end. More and more pain is piling up, piling up, piling up. It gets more and more oppressive. But you can think of it the other way. As soon as you notice a pain, it disappears. You notice it, and you notice it disappearing. Each pain, each moment of pain, goes away, goes away, goes away. It’s not coming at you, it’s going away from you. If you hold that perception in mind, how does that affect the way you relate to the pain? So those are some ideas about how you might deal with the pain. But they won’t work all the time. You begin to get the general idea, then you try to apply it in different ways, use your imagination. In other words, you take the basic principle. You don’t abandon the basic principle, which is that the most important issue here is your perception. And you’re here to comprehend pain, to understand it. You’re not here to make it go away. Because ultimately what you want to be able to do is to be able to stay with physical pain and not have the mind pained. That’s the skill that we’re working on here. And it’s going to require effort. Simply saying, “Okay, I accept the pain,” and that makes it no longer suffering, that doesn’t work. There are occasions when simply accepting the fact that it’s there makes it a lot less burdensome. But there’s more to the pain than just that. Sometimes, as the Buddha says, you have to exert a fabrication against it, which means bodily fabrication. Or with the way you think about the pain and evaluate the pain, that’s verbal fabrication. Or in your perceptions around the feeling of the pain, that’s mental fabrication. You have to work with these things. Sometimes the effort will have to be strong, and other times it will have to be very gentle. The important thing is that you have the desire to work with the pain. That’s the first basis of success, which enables you to stick with it, to pay attention to it, and try to figure it out. Use your ingenuity. Once you find that this issue begins to capture your imagination, so that you’re not feeling oppressed by the pain, but you see it more as an area to explore, an area to learn, because you start seeing results, that’s when the meditation begins to catch fire, begins to take off, and starts to develop momentum. So this element of ingenuity and imagination is important in the practice. It’s not that you’re sitting here just thinking of dream worlds. You see a problem, and you understand the Buddha’s basic principles on how to deal with a problem. And then you have to learn to use your ingenuity to figure out how to apply the basic principles to the particulars of the problem you’ve got right here, right now. You can’t expect a technique to do everything for you. You can’t expect a teacher to explain everything for you, because most of the time when you’re meditating, you’re on your own. And you have to learn how to handle problems on your own. So the right attitude is to do what you can to learn the basic principles and learn what other people have found works for them, and then apply it to your particular problem, realizing that the way you understand that other person’s words may already be colored by your own ignorance, so you’re not absolutely sure that you got it right from the person, from the teacher. Take what you understand, and then as you apply it, you work with it. Think of a John Lee in the forest that time when he had his heart attack. He had already learned that you can work with the breath energy and the body in different ways, so he tried to apply that to the problem of his heart attack, so he could get his health back. He was going to have to walk out at the end of the rains retreat. It was going to be three days of walking through the jungle. Even a normally healthy person… Even a normally healthy person would have problems. Here’s someone that just suffered a heart attack. So he used his ingenuity to figure out how the breath could help heal him. Heal his heart, heal the rest of his body. And you notice that when he wrote down the steps in Method Two, he had one particular way of advising how to get the breath energy to flow through the body. But then you read some of his other Dhamma talks and he has other ways of picturing the breath energy, classifying the different types of breath energy, which is a sign that he didn’t stop after that first experience with his heart attack. He kept on playing with the breath, experimenting with the breath, using his ingenuity, thinking up new ways of conceiving the breath. So take his example to heart. You’ve got the basic principles, but for them to really work, you have to learn how to use your imagination, your ingenuity. To turn them around, turn them upside down, inside out, to see what works for you. One of John Lee’s basic principles is when you gain an insight, ask yourself, “Well, what if the opposite is true as well?” Keep experimenting. The more you’re willing to experiment, the more you learn.

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