

Encouragement

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By all rights, the breath should be the thing that we're most familiar with in our lives. And yet when you start out meditating, it seems alien. Why stay just with the breath? What does it have to offer? This is a thought that'll occur to you not only at the beginning of your meditative career but also many times throughout it. There'll come a point when you'll say, "This is really stupid. I'm not using any intelligence. I'm just staying here with this very basic physical phenomenon."

But because it is so basic, that's why it's so important. And because we need skill in learning how to stay with something a long period of time, that's why there's very little emphasis placed on being clever in the meditation. I mean, you do use your ingenuity to get the mind to settle down and, once it's settled down, you use your ingenuity in getting it to stay there. But once you've got it to stay there, then you just have to learn to stick with it. Make that your basic habit. Make it so that it's the most familiar part of your life: what's happening to the breath, what's happening in the present moment, so that ultimately you can see deeper into what's going on in your mind.

Without this basic skill, all the understanding you might have about the mind, your psychology, the Buddha's teachings, is all just concepts. You can reason about it and you can argue about it, but it doesn't really accomplish the purpose of the Buddha's teachings, which is to get the mind beyond suffering. And in the course of gaining release from suffering, you gain release from a lot of problems. A lot of other issues get settled as well.

So we're working on a skill. As you approach this skill, you need to have the same attitude you'd have toward any skill. You have to give a lot of time to it, and you have to develop the sort of patience that comes with learning a skill. For a lot of us, that kind of patience is something that we've never really learned. So many things are done automatically, instantly for us. There are so many machines that take over the things that used to require skill.

A simple thing like sharpening a knife: All you have to do is run the blade through a knife sharpener now, *zip, zip*, and it's sharp. Back in the past, though, you needed a whetstone. It took time, and you had to be very patient and very steady in what you were doing. If you got impatient and wanted to get the knife really sharp, really fast, you ended up spoiling the blade. So you had to be very patient and very steady in your attentiveness. If you stopped being attentive, something bad would happen to the blade.

The same with making a pot, and with all kinds of skills people used to have to master just in order to function on a daily basis, in order to live comfortably. Nowadays most us have lost those skills.

But meditation is still one thing that you can't have a machine do for you. There's no instant meditation pill or instant meditation machine. So if you haven't already developed patience in other skills, well, you've got to learn how to develop patience right here, right now. That means putting up with the impulse to run off and do something else. Because learning a skill means that there are other things you have to put aside, other things you have to give up. You want to really give your time to this. And the question with each skill is exactly how much time is it worth?

For example, playing chess: I remember reading a book written back in the Renaissance talking about the skills that a gentleman should master. It made an interesting point, saying that you should learn enough chess to be good at it but not so good that you're an expert, because it's really not worth it. The amount of time required to become a chess master doesn't really pay off. If you're too good at chess, it shows that you don't know how to manage your time. So devote enough time to it so that you can make a respectable showing, but nothing more. There are more important things in life.

Yet when it comes to the meditation, it's hard to think of anything that would be more important than mastering the skill to overcome suffering. So this is the kind of skill that the more time you can put into it, the better. The more you master it, the better. There's no one point where you can say that you're too good at meditation. So it's something you can give yourself to wholeheartedly.

After all, look at the path and where it leads: to a total release from suffering. Not only the Buddha but many noble disciples: Men, women, children from ever since the time of the Buddha who really have given themselves to the practice have all come out saying, Yes, it's more than worth it.

So you owe it to yourself to put it to the test. To whatever extent you're able to lessen your suffering, it's time well-spent. The mastery you get over the mind in terms of being more mindful, being more alert—whether you can give your whole life to the meditation or have other responsibilities—all the time you spent on it is time well-spent, whether you get to the end of the path or not.

So keep these points in mind, especially in the beginning stages where it sometimes seems that you're stumbling and picking yourself up and stumbling and picking yourself up again and again. Sometimes there are good sessions immediately followed by sessions where the mind's all over the place. There doesn't seem to be any nice, steady progress. Keep reminding yourself that's the way skills are. If this were a very simple skill, the kind of skill where you could make steady progress, it wouldn't have such a deep impact on the mind. The mind is a very complex phenomenon, so its progress, its growing mastery, is going to be a complex process as well.

Ajaan Lee makes a comparison with a banana tree as opposed to a tree with lots of branches. The banana tree has only one stem. It grows very quickly, it gives fruit, and then it dies. But trees with lots of branches, like big oaks or teak trees: They take a long time to grow

but once they've grown, then there's a lot of heartwood to them. A banana tree has no heartwood at all. You peel away the layers and there's nothing. But the trees that take a long time: Those are the ones that have a lot of heartwood and they're really valuable. And it's the same with this skill of meditation. Sometimes it takes a lot of time and patience, but the results that you get are more than worth it.

So an important part of this skill is your ability to pick yourself up when you stumble, dust yourself off, give yourself some encouragement, and then keep on going. Once you can develop that attitude, then the meditation will have to make progress. If you let yourself get discouraged by minor setbacks, you can guarantee that there are going to be minor setbacks all along the way, so you're setting yourself up for failure. But realize that it's a normal part of developing a complex skill: You'll have great sessions and immediately after that, because you get on a roll and your expectations get high and your mindfulness gets sloppy, the next session is almost guaranteed to be a mess.

So when things go well, don't let yourself get carried away. Just try to note, after you've come out of a good session, "Okay, what did I do just now? Why did that work?" When you come out of a bad session or you're in the middle of a bad session, "Okay, why is it not working? What can be changed?" In other words, try to maintain as much equanimity throughout the whole process whether it's going well or going poorly, so that you can observe cause and effect to get a sense of exactly what does and doesn't work. And each time you meditate, if it's not going well again, put what you've learned to the test to further refine your powers of observation.

When you do that, every session of meditation becomes a good session in the sense that you've been observant, you've watched. Even when things don't go well throughout the whole session, you've learned what a bad meditation is like. And you've learned to stick with it in spite of the fact that it's not going well. That stick-with-it-tiveness is an important skill. It's an important quality needed in the meditation.

So when it goes well, you keep on sitting. When it doesn't seem to go well, you just keep on sitting. Do your best to keep your powers of observation alert and alive, so that you can catch the little things that make the difference. And often it's just that, the details: that extra little bit of sensitivity to the breath, that extra little bit of trying to lengthen the amount of time you're mindful. Because you'll find your mindfulness tends to go in phrases, if we can make a comparison with music. It has a phrase and then the phrase stops; and then there's a new phrase and that phrase stops. In the beginning, the mindfulness tends to go for a little while and then stops for a second. Then you pick it up again and go for another while. Well, try to lengthen each of those phrases so they don't last for just one breath, but several breaths; or not just several breaths, more than that, until finally you get to the point where the mindfulness sticks and just stays there continually from one breath to the next to the next to the next, and there are no more breaks between phrases.

It's usually a matter of just minor, minor things: the texture of the breath, the pressure of your awareness, the amount of push you give—not too much, not too little: All of this comes as part of the skill of learning what's too much, what's too little. And that can be learned only through trial and error.

If things seem not to be going well, you can remind yourself that at least you're on the right path. You're doing a major operation on the mind. If you don't do it, who's going to do it for you? It's something you've got to do for yourself. And if you don't do it now, when is it going to get done?

The skills you develop in meditation are the things you have to fall back on when things get tough in life: your mindfulness, your alertness, your discernment. When illness comes, when accidents come, when loss and suffering come, when death comes: The qualities of mind you build through the meditation are the only things you'll be able to depend on to see you through.

It's at times like that you'll be really grateful to yourself that you did put in this time now and you didn't waste it frittering it away or following other diversions. There's serious work that needs to be done in the mind, you're doing it, and you're doing your best at it. Okay, what more could you want? Your life has a direction. It has a goal.

It's interesting how much we hear that Buddhism is goalless, or the path is the goal—that kind of teaching. But that's not the way the Dhamma actually is. There's a definite goal: nibbana. And as the Buddha said, it's the highest happiness.

I was reading recently a letter from someone who was teaching in India at a college that the Indians were trying to make as Western as possible. So they posted all sorts of encouraging 19th-century Western-style encouragements on posters on the walls. And one of the posters said, "Happiness is having a goal." But now, Western psychologists are teaching us, "If you have too many goals, you make yourself miserable. Accept yourself as you are." So who's right? Think of all the people out there living directionless lives. Can that be called happiness? Can that kind of life be fulfilling?

It's a question that each of us has to answer for him or herself.