

Adolescent Practice

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If you don't think the idea of rebirth is scary, think of having to go through adolescence all over again – all the awkwardness, the embarrassment, all the problems of adolescence, high school, dating, asserting your independence. We're always glad that we've gotten past those things. But when you come to meditate, it's like going through adolescence all over again. When you start out, you're given a set of rules to follow. That's like being a child: Don't do this, don't do that, do this, do that. And for a while the rules work. But then there comes a time when, if you're going to make the meditation your own, you've got to test the rules. That's adolescence, which is why it's difficult, because sometimes the rules are good rules that can carry you all the way through adulthood, while other rules are best put away now that you're now longer a child. Sometimes the problem is that you had a childish understanding of the rules and, as you grow up, you've got to change that understanding. So you've got to sort that all out. No wonder it's an awkward time.

The same goes with meditation. You're told, "Focus on the breath." And in the beginning you're often told, "Don't meddle with the breath. Just let it come in and go out at its own rate." You may get the basic idea that the less you interfere in the present moment, the better; the more passive you become, the better. But that makes it difficult to integrate meditation with your life. Are you going to go through life totally passive in every situation? That doesn't work. It's like a walking death. So you've got to test the rule to see whether it's the kind of rule that says, "Before you cross the road, hold onto somebody's hand," or the type that says, "Before you cross the road, look both ways. Check the oncoming traffic first." Holding somebody's hand is a rule specifically for children; when you grow up, you don't need to follow it anymore. But the rule about looking both ways is a good rule to follow whether you're a child or an adult.

So, the rule about not meddling with your breath: Which kind of rule is that? It's a holding-the-hand kind of rule. Meditation teachers often feel that people brand new to meditation will probably mess up their breath if they try to control it too much. In order to avoid that, they tell you not to get involved, to be as passive as possible. But as you gain more experience with the breath, you don't need to hold onto the teacher's hand anymore. You have to look for yourself. You have to experiment with the breath. Otherwise you'll never get a sense of how much subconscious molding of the breath is still going on, down under the surface of your consciousness. You'll never get a sense of what input you're

putting into the present moment. That's crucial to the meditation, for only when you see it are you in a position where you can try to refine it.

So you have to go through that awkward stage of messing with the breath too much, making it too long, making it too short, using too much pressure to change the breath to fit it into what you think might be a good mold. Or when you find something good, you tend to hold onto it well past the time when it's really worth holding onto. Or you force the breath into different parts of the body where it's best not to force it. These are issues you have to learn through experience, through making mistakes. You have to go through the adolescence of your meditation to get a sense of what's just right. That's where you begin to reach maturity, to develop finesse in your meditation.

But to gain that finesse, that sense of "just right," you have to go through the awkward stages — doing it wrong, learning how to recognize it for wrong — and because of the awkwardness, we tend to avoid them. But there's no way you're going to get out of your childhood and into your adulthood as a meditator unless you go through these stages.

So, when you work with the breath, keep two things in mind. One is that you're going to experiment with the breath to see what feels good right now. The other is that you also have to look at the way you're experimenting. You watch both the breath and the mind as it's dealing with the breath. And there are no hard and fast rules here. You have to feel your way.

This is why the path is a gradual path. The Buddha once compared the path of practice to the continental shelf off of India. There's a gradual slope and then a sudden drop, like the continental shelf off the east coast of the United States. We all look forward to that sudden drop but, as the Buddha says, you first have to go through the gradual slope before you get there. Sometimes our approach to meditation is simply hoping for the sudden drop to come, thinking that if we can make ourselves as still and passive as we can in the present moment, that will open a space for grace to drop on us. In other words, we're waiting for the accident of Awakening to happen, but it doesn't happen that way. You reach the drop by taking the gradual slope.

In other words, as you get more and more sensitive to what you're doing in the present moment, your input into the present gets more refined until you finally get to the point where you really can let it stop. But you have to go through many, many layers of intention first, for it's only through gradually developing skill in this area that you can really sense the most subtle forms of intention. This is why the activity of developing skill in the way you deal with the breath is not a distraction from vast openness of Awakening. That's not the case at all. True Awakening comes through the process of getting more and more sensitive to what you're doing, doing it with more and more refinement, until the ultimate layers of refinement can be seen and abandoned.

So this focus on being skillful is a preparation. It's what gets us to the sudden drop of Awakening. Otherwise, how are you going to develop your sensitivity?

If you don't develop your sensitivity, where are you going to get the discernment that leads to Awakening? It has to come through this process of being willing to make mistakes, of being patient with the gradual process.

We're an impatient nation. We want things to happen right away. We look at the past and say, "Oh, those people didn't know anything. They had to go through this long, involved process because they didn't understand the quick and easy way to get things done." And yet so often the quick way to get things done may yield quick results but not lasting results – results that might not be good over the long term, that might actually go bad. And meditation is one of those areas where time is required. Patience is required. You've got to invest the time and attention needed to develop a skill.

You're getting to know the breath. It's like getting to know a person. As the Buddha said with regard to that kind of knowledge, you have to be observant and willing to put in a fair amount of time. Only then can you gain a sense of familiarity. Think of yourself as becoming friends with the breath. In any friendship there's got to be give and take. There are going to be awkward moments. Ups and downs. But if you stick with it, with the good-heartedness needed to weather the downs, and the powers of observation to know when you've made a mistake, to admit your mistakes, then the friendship can grow. That's when your friend can start revealing all of his or her secrets.

And the breath has lots of fascinating secrets. There are lots of interesting things to find out in the energy flow of the breathing. You can start seeing how the breath affects your feelings, exactly which experience is a breath experience, and which experience is a feeling experience – feeling pleasure or pain. As you really look into these things, you begin to see that you've often drawn the lines in your body and mind in the wrong places. For instance, the aggregates of form and feeling: the actual movement of the energy is form, the sense of pleasure or pain that goes along with it is the feeling, and it can be extremely fleeting. When you see how fleeting feelings are – much more fleeting than even subtle sensations of breath – that rearranges your notion about how you've been living your life. You realize how much of your life you've spent chasing after pleasant feelings and only to see more and more clearly how fleeting they are.

So as you really look into this process of breathing, there's an awful lot to see. If you're willing to stick with the ups and downs of that gradual slope, you find that there's always something to do, something to learn. If you're sitting around waiting for Awakening to happen, it gets pretty desensitizing after a while – putting yourself into a dead, dull mood, saying, "We'll just wait here long enough and maybe it'll come." You get so that you no longer look at what you're doing. So the end result is that you're actually desensitizing yourself to a lot of the stuff going on in the mind. You try to hide it from yourself hoping that, "If I hide it well enough, then the enlightenment will be fooled and it'll come" – like a child trying to fool Santa Claus.

But if you work with the breath—each breath coming in, noticing what kinds of feelings it gives rise to, what you can do to make it a more pleasurable breath—you're engaged in a process that makes you more sensitive. And what is discernment but heightened sensitivity? We often think of discernment as trying to clone our minds into seeing things the way the Buddha tells us to see them. But that ends up just adding one more layer of conjecture to our ignorance. When he tells us to look for the inconstancy and the stress in things, he's not telling us to come to the conclusion that they're inconstant and stressful. He's telling us how to develop sensitivity: Can you sense really refined levels of inconstancy? Can you sense really refined levels of stress? What happens when you do?

This is what the meditation is designed to do. As you discover those more and more refined levels and take them apart to create a greater sense of stability, a greater sense of wellbeing in the mind, you finally get to the point of equilibrium where everything opens up. You fall into what they call the stream—the point where there's no input into the present moment. You know this for sure because you've thoroughly sensitized yourself to every kind of input the mind has had, every little discussion, every little agreement it's made with itself, even the sublinguistic communication going on in the mind. You've become more and more sensitive to that, to the point where it stops and you're no longer doing anything.

This is where the path takes over. The path actually does the work from that point on. It opens you to the Deathless. This is why it's called the stream, because there's a sense of current pulling you along without your having to do anything at all. But to get to that point, you've got to do a lot of doing and be very sensitive to what you're doing, so you can know for sure when there's really and truly no intention in the mind, and when it only seems that way.

So this little exercise here, of adjusting the breath, evaluating the breath: That's the beginning of discernment, the beginning of insight into the three characteristic of inconstancy, stress, and not self. It's crucial to the practice. It's the stage where you're not just obeying the rules for children. You're actually getting a sense of how the rules really work, and of which ones apply to you as a mature meditator.

And even though it may be awkward going through this adolescence of testing things and tripping over your mistakes, nobody else has to know about the mistakes you've made. The important point is that you actually learn from them. Even though it may be awkward, that's how you grow up.