

## *A Willingness to Learn*

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Each time you settle in to meditate, you've got to take stock of your mind: to see what shape it's in, to see what it needs right now. Sometimes it's really tired, it's been thinking a lot and so it needs to rest. At other times, it's sluggish and it needs to be activated.

An important part of the meditation is learning how to read these symptoms and then prescribe the right medicine.

The medicine is laid out in those seven steps in Method 2. If the mind's been thinking too much, all you need to do is focus on one thing: the breath, the sensation of the breath coming in, the sensation of the breath going out. And make it comfortable.

If the mind's really been tired, that's all you have to do for the hour. Just try to remember to stay with as much comfortable breathing as possible. Give the mind a chance to rest, give it a chance to gain some nourishment, give it some ballast.

At other times, once the breath gets comfortable enough, then you want to go right into surveying the body. See how the breathing feels in different parts and do what you can to deal with any sense of tightness or tension or pain in the body, working your way up to being aware of the whole body as your breath comes in, the whole body as the breath goes out. Or choosing a particular point of focus: You may find focusing on the nose is not comfortable, so move around until you find a place that feels right for you.

Meditation tends to swing back and forth between these two poles: on the one hand, giving the mind a chance to rest, and on the other hand giving it work to do. You've got to learn how to read the symptoms of the mind that needs to do work or that needs to rest. Otherwise, if you give it work to do and it's already exhausted, it's going to rebel. Or if you just let it rest when it's already well rested, then nothing happens. The meditation doesn't move anywhere, doesn't develop any direction.

So a large part of the skill in the meditation is learning how to read your mind. Because after all, that's what the meditation is all about: learning how to read the mind, how to notice, okay, when there's greed, when there's anger, when there's delusion, when there's too much desire, when there's too little desire in the practice. Because the whole purpose of meditating, giving the mind a topic to focus on, is not that you study just that topic. You also learn how to read the mind

in all its different manifestations.

And that's not something that can be dictated from the outside. Sometimes we like to have the idea that there's one technique that you can use in all circumstances and you don't have to think too much about it: Just fit the mind into the mold no matter what. But that tends to dull your sensitivities rather than heightening them. And it doesn't teach you how to read the mind at all.

Often you notice in the techniques where they have the steps all laid out very carefully that you have to go running to the teacher to have the teacher explain what happened, place a label on what you've experienced. In other words, you turn all your powers of evaluation over to the method, over to somebody else.

That's not the way the Buddha did things at all. He learned to turn around and look at his own mind, reading the symptoms of his mind as if he were a doctor, and then seeing what medicines he could devise to compensate for any imbalance in the mind.

So your mind is in a position of being both the doctor and the patient, and the meditation is a way of training the doctor as you cure the patient. The doctor learns how to diagnose the disease, how to apply the right remedy. And in the course of doing that, it gains a lot of discernment. And this is the discernment that ultimately leads to release, the total cure.

There are passages where the Buddha talks about getting the mind into strong states of concentration and then staying there long enough, not being in a hurry to jump onto the next stage. Otherwise, you get lost in between and then can't get back to where you started out from. But there are also passages where he talks about an ability to step back a little bit, to observe what's going on. The analogy he gives is of a person sitting down looking at a person lying down, or a person standing looking at a person sitting. In other words, you pull back slightly so that you can observe the mind. You don't totally leave concentration but you're not fully absorbed either.

This is what Ajaan Fuang called lifting the mind a bit above its object. And the purpose of that is to see what the mind is doing, so that you get a perspective not only on the object but also in the mind in relation to the object. And it's from that perspective that discernment develops.

But these two stages of being fully absorbed in your object and of pulling back slightly go back and forth: It's not the case that one is better than the other or that one can make do without the other. They can't do without each other. They help each other along. Your only duty is to notice which side you need to emphasize: the side of the stillness or the side of the directed thought and evaluation.

Because you're not only treating your illness, you're also training your doctor.

And fortunately as a meditator, no matter what you do to the illness, the patient doesn't die. He or she keeps coming back. Death here would be that you totally abandon meditation. But as long as you stick with the meditation, the patient doesn't die. You get another chance to treat the illness, another chance to try new approaches.

The important thing in the meditation is that you always stand by your willingness to learn. That's what'll see you through everything.