

Ingenuity

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There's more to the mind than you can ever find in a book. This is why, when you meditate, you often are going to run into things that you never read about, which is why one of the important skills in meditation is, one, to be observant, and two, to use your ingenuity. There's no way that the ways of the mind could all be written down and placed between the covers of a book, at least any book you could carry, any book you could pick up, even if you're strong enough to pick up and read a huge book. Even then, who knows? The fact that the book was so huge would mean it would be useless when you're face to face with a defilement.

This is why the Buddha pared his teachings down to the bare necessary minimum. You know the simile of the forest of simsapa trees. The Buddha is staying in the simsapa forest and one day picks up a handful of simsapa leaves, which are about the size of little dimes. He asks the monks: "Which is more? The leaves in my hand or the leaves in the forest?" "Of course," the monks say, "the leaves in the forest are more." In the same way, Buddha said, the knowledge he gained through his awakening was like the leaves in the forest; what he taught was the leaves in his hand. Why is that? Because what he taught was necessary for the end of suffering. The other leaves weren't.

Or to make another comparison, there was the time when a man asked Ven. Ananda for a fire escape, as he felt as if he were in a house on fire. "Please show me the way to get out of the house." So Ananda described eleven ways of focusing the mind—basically, the first seven of the eight jhanas, and then the four limitless or immeasurable states—and how to use any one of those as a basis for gaining insight. The man commented that it was like having asked for one exit from a burning house and being told eleven.

Notice that Ananda didn't give the whole set of plans for the house, just the way to get out of the house when it's burning.

The Buddha kept his teachings compact in this way, even though the teachings fill up the books here in the bookcase. There are a lot of issues he just doesn't touch because they're not useful. If you were to focus on them, the things that are really useful would get lost.

So it's important to realize that, as you meditate, you may run into things that are not described in the books. Think about the forest ajans being out alone in the forest meditating, and think about all the things that came up in their minds as they meditated miles and miles away from their teacher. They had to use their

own ingenuity. It was in learning how to trust the basic principles of the practice, and then applying them to unusual circumstances: That's how they gained a greater and greater sense of the Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Sangha as their refuge.

The sense of refuge is made really palpable when you're meditating in a dangerous forest. What have you got? The forest monks have no weapons, and the forests are full of dangers. In Thailand, they don't have that romantic sense of the forest that we do, as simply a beautiful place to commune with nature. The forest over there seems more aggressive than the forest here. Snakes, wild animals, malaria: What do you do in a place like that?

There's a passage in the Canon where a monk is out alone in a grassland, far away from anyone else, and he's sick. So he asks himself, "Now that you're sick, out alone in this wilderness here, what are you going to do? Are you going to go back?" He says, "No, I'm going to focus on the four establishments of mindfulness, develop the seven factors of awakening, the five strengths, and that's going to be my refuge." When there's no medicine around, when there's no doctor, this is where you look for your refuge: in the strengths of the mind.

This is why it's important that you put your practice on the edge sometimes, to push it more than you might normally feel comfortable with. When you get the mind cornered like that, that's when you begin to see its potential for ingenuity. Sometimes it'll just sit there and suffer until you're finally ready to say, "Enough of this. There must be a way out of this."

And the way out is not just getting up and going away. It's looking for what resources you have in the mind in the present moment. If you're face-to-face with pain, what can you use—with these skills you've learned with the breath, the skills you've learned with concentration—to help alleviate the pain? Maybe they can't make the pain go away, but they can at least help your mind not get upset about the pain. How can you use your discernment to figure out where is the awareness and where is the pain and in what way the awareness is separate from the pain, so that you don't have to be weighed down by the suffering that the mind adds to the pain?

This is why the teachings on the four elements or the four properties are very useful. Learn to look at your body in terms of earth, water, wind, and fire, and on top of that the two other elements as well: space and consciousness. When they call these properties "elements," it can lead to a misunderstanding. They're not talking about the chemical elements, they're talking about elementary sensations, elementary properties. The belief was that you have these potentials in every spot of the body for solidity, warmth, liquidity, and movement or energy of the breath.

They're all there. And they can be provoked. Sometimes they can be provoked in an unfortunate way, as when a disease comes on. Some diseases are equated with, say, the fire element being provoked, or the wind element being provoked. The potential is there, and all of a sudden, it gets lit.

Or as Ajaan Lee says, it's like taking the needle of a record player—in the old days, when you had vinyl record player, you could take the needle of the record player and just put it down on any spot of the record, and you'd get a sound. You can learn how to do the same with your meditation to counteract any imbalance in elements. Suppose the body feels too warm. Where are the cool sensations in the body? Focus there. Give all your attention to that cool sensation, and let everything else go. Then think of the coolness spreading. When you're feeling dizzy and faint, focus on the solidity of the body. Where do you feel solid sensations? The heavy sensations? Focus there.

This is useful not only when you're feeling dizzy or lightheaded. I've known people who tend to be manic/depressive. When you're in a manic state, it's good to focus on the solidity of the body. When you're in a depressive state, it's good to focus on the breath to lighten things up, to counterbalance the physical sensations that get provoked by those mental states.

Or on a much more trivial but nevertheless useful level, if you find yourself in a situation where you have an uncontrollable urge to laugh and you know you shouldn't laugh, focus on the solidity down your stomach, down in your pelvis. Just think "earth, earth, earth."

In other words, you can use the meditation in all kinds of ways, and all kinds of places. It's not just for the transcendent. As Ajaan Lee says, when you walk along the path, you find plants growing on the edge of the path. They're not the path themselves, they're not the goal, but they may be useful. Learn which plants you can eat, which plants are useful as medicine, so that you can have food and medicine to help you along the way.

There are lots of stories in the forest tradition about the ways concentration can be used. One very standard one is that you've got an issue in your life that you've got to think about, a choice you've got to make, and you have no idea how any of the options will turn out. Well, you just sit down and meditate, pose the question in your mind, then drop it and put the mind into concentration. Don't deal with the question while you're in concentration. Then see what pops up in the mind as you come out. There's no 100% guarantee that what pops up in your mind will be the right solution, but it's got a lot better chance of being the right solution because it's coming from a quiet mind.

Then there are the stories that are fun to tell, and it's good to know about them. Yom Thaem, a student of my teacher, was an elderly woman who came to meditation when she was in her 70s, quite late in life. But she developed good strong powers of concentration. She happened to meet Ajaan Fuang shortly before he left Wat Asokaram. She learned the basics of meditation from him, and then he left. This meant that she had to learn a lot about meditation on her own.

She tended to have visions in her meditation. And of course she had to learn how to deal with visions: which ones to trust, which ones not to trust.

She told me the story of one time when she was meditating in her little hut there in Wat Asokaram. It was under a *samae* tree, which is a large tree with very shallow roots that tends to lean. Word came over the radio that a typhoon coming in from the Gulf of Siam was going to smack into the coast of Thailand right there at Wat Asokaram. She was concerned that this huge tree leaning over her hut was going to fall down and squash her like a bug. So the question came up in her mind: How do these typhoons work? Can you stop a typhoon?

She got into meditation, posed the question, and went into concentration. She got a vision of a column of warm air rising up, up, up from the ocean, causing other winds to circle around it. So she said, well, if the rising column of air is causing the typhoon, what happens if you cut it? So in her vision, she cut, cut, cut the column. And sure enough, the actual typhoon disappeared.

I can't promise that you can stop typhoons with your meditation, but it's good to have a sense of the power of concentration. Often it goes beyond what you would ordinarily think. You really can have an impact on the world.

So be alive to that possibility, that your concentration might have uses you would ordinarily not think about. But as you start out, you don't have to worry about outside weather. Just take care of the weather inside your body: the heat and the cold, the solidity and the motion. Learn to look at your sense of the body in those terms and then make use of that understanding. You may come to realize that it's not some awkward pre-modern pseudoscience. It's a natural way of relating to the body that you actually can put to use and from which you can gain results.

This aspect of playing with the elements is not mentioned in the Canon, but when you learn how to use it as a meditator, you'll find it doesn't matter whether it's in the Canon or not. You can still get use out of it. You find you can sit for longer periods of time—and you can push the envelope on that issue of suffering, pain in the body. The Buddha doesn't say just give in to every pain that's there. Sometimes the best way to learn about suffering is to push the envelope, see how far you can get rid of the suffering in the body. Then when you run up against

something you really cannot get rid of, then you know for sure you've got to find other means. It requires more insight.

This is one of the themes of the practice. We hear all about stress, inconstancy, not-self—not-self here basically coming down to a lack of control over what happens to the aggregates. But notice what happens in concentration practice. You take all these things that are said to be inconstant, and you try to make them as constant as possible. Your perception of the breath, the feelings that come from the way you breathe: You take these things that are said to be stressful and you make them as comfortable as possible. These things that are ultimately out of your control, you see how much control you can exert over them. It's only when you flip things around like this that you get a genuine sense of what the Buddha is talking about when he talks about inconstancy, stress, and not-self, because you push against them until they push back.

So use your ingenuity in the practice when you come up with issues that you haven't found in the books. Take the basic principles and how you can apply what you already know to the issues, flip things around a little bit and see what happens. Take the opposite of what you think you know and experiment: "Maybe this is what applies here right now." It's only when you test things and push things like this that you can really learn.