

Flexibility

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When we come to meditation, we come with a lot of presuppositions about what we want out of it, what it's going to do, how it's going to work. Some of those presuppositions are helpful and some are not. So look at the meditation as a way of testing your presuppositions, to figure out which ones are working, which ones aren't, and also to note that some of them will work sometimes and not at other times. There's a time and place for just about everything.

For instance, your breath: What is your breath? You can think of it as the air coming in and out of the lungs. You can think of it as energy flowing through the body. You can think of it as energy, period, because there are places where Ajaan Lee, for instance, talks about a still breath: It's energetic but it's still. We're testing to see which of these conceptions is helpful for you at a particular time, a particular place, a particular stage in the meditation.

This principle applies all across the board, not just with your breath, but also with your concept of self. Sometimes it's useful, sometimes it's not. Often we're taught that the Buddha had nothing but bad things to say about ideas of self or "me" or "mine," but look at his instructions on meditating. He'll give descriptions of the meditator's internal dialogue. Breathing meditation: "I'll breathe in and out short; I'll breathe in and out long"—there's an "I" there. With the hindrances: "A hindrance has arisen within me, and a hindrance has passed away within me"—there's a "me" there. What that points to, of course, is that you're the one responsible for what you're doing and you're looking inside yourself. Those are useful concepts when you need them. But you also need to know when to let them go.

Ajaan Chah tells a story about four people going into the forest. They hear a rooster crow, and three of them, just for the fun of it, put their heads together and say, "Is that a rooster or a hen? We think it's a hen." The other one says, "No, that's a rooster." They go back and forth like that: "How could a hen crow like that?" "Well, it has a mouth, doesn't it?" the other ones say. As Ajaan Chah says, even though the one person was right, he's the one who ends up crying. Being right to the point of crying doesn't help anything at all. So learn when to use your ideas, when to use your suppositions, and when to put them aside. If you use them in this way, then they really serve a purpose. If you learn how to test them, getting a sense of time and place, that's when you become skilled in the meditation.

In Thailand they have the word *ditṭhi*. It's taken from the Pali word for view, opinion, but as it developed in Thai, it also means pride, conceit. That's why we have to learn how to put our views aside, the idea that your ideas must be right and you're going to hold onto their rightness no matter what, even in the face of when it's not right to hold on. Ajaan Fuang used to say, you can be right, but as soon as you start clinging to your rightness, you've gone wrong. Now, this doesn't mean just that you hold on to these things and use them when they're useful. It also means you've got to learn when it's the time to hold on, when it's the time to let go, when a concept is helpful and when it is not.

So we're meditating to test these things. Think of the meditation not as an effort to clone something. You may have heard that an enlightened person is like this—very equanimous, very non-dual—so you try to clone your idea of enlightenment. Or a true meditator has to act like this—no personality, no nothing—so you clone that. But that gets in the way. You can't clone awakening. The Buddha never tries to teach that way. Right cloning is not a factor in the path. He gives you things to do, tools to use, toward awakening. And you learn which tool to use it which time. In some cases, he's got some instructions on that. Other times, you have to learn for yourself. But learning for yourself is a very important part of the path. Otherwise, you don't develop discernment.

So as you meditate, be willing to make mistakes and be willing to learn from them. There are things you do that will lead you to the end of the path. It's like the road to the Grand Canyon. The road to the Grand Canyon doesn't look like the Grand Canyon—it's not red, it's not deep—but it gets you there. Actually, the road itself doesn't get you there, you follow the road and you find yourself in the Grand Canyon. If you try to make the road look like the Grand Canyon, you actually prevent yourself from getting there. You dig a deep trench in the road, paint it red, and you'll never get to the Grand Canyon.

So our road here is virtue, concentration, and discernment. Release comes at the end. It's the result. You focus on the causes, and the result will have to come. It's like the sense of ease that you gain in the meditation, the sense of fullness, rapture, refreshment: As long as you focus on the cause, you're okay. If you leave the cause and just try to hold on to the rapture, it's like trying to grab hold of a cloud. But if you understand that you keep the mind focused on the breath in a particular way, the continuity with which you do it, the right amount of pressure, and the breath is not too heavy, not too light: You focus on doing that properly, and the rapture just keeps coming and coming and coming until you have enough. Then you can focus in a different way and the rapture will fade away. What happens is that you go under the radar, and you find yourself tuning-in to a more

refined level, a different way of conceiving the breath, a different way of focusing: just a slight change, but it's enough to get a more refreshed, calm, light sense of ease.

So there are lots of different levels in the meditation, lots of different ways of comprehending the breath, perceiving the breath. Ajaan Fuang would often talk of the different levels of concentration not in terms of this jhāna or that jhana, but he would say to focus on the breath and feel it this way, then think of the breath that way, then experience the breath this way, and you find yourself going through levels of concentration. Or sometimes he would have you give your own words to the way you experience it and then he'd use those words with you.

That way, you sidestep the whole issue of which jhana you have. "Is it the fourth or the fifth or whatever?" Or "My jhana is better than your jhana," which happens a lot. We're not here in a jhana contest. We're here trying to explore what's going on in our own mind, which presuppositions we bring into the practice are going to be helpful and which ones get in the way. Sometimes issues come up in the meditation that are not the ones you anticipated, not the ones you planned, but they may be the issues that the mind needs to deal with right now. Okay, you accept that and put aside your plans.

Living in the monastery really reinforces that lesson over and over again. When you want to sit and meditate, something else can come up. A freeze comes up and you have to get out the smudge pots. One of the smudge pots set things on fire just as you're getting into the bath—okay, you get out of the bath and you go out and put out the fire. When I was with Ajaan Fuang, he would give me a translation project to work on but then he would get sick, and I had to put the project aside and go look after him. I realized that as long as I was stuck on the idea that I really wanted to get that translation project done, I was going to suffer. But if you say, "Okay, now is not the time to work on that," put it aside, and do what needs to be done right now, whether it's a job you feel confident doing or one you're still awkward at, or something totally out in your left field, still if it's the issue that's coming up right now, you deal with it. Learn how to handle whatever problems arise, whether they're the ones you want to deal with right now or not. Deal with the ones you have to.

That develops a lot of good qualities in the mind, beginning with the willingness, the ability to put aside a preconceived notion and deal with the actual problem. After all, what are your preconceived notions based on? There's an element of ignorance in all of them. Some of them have worked in the past, so there's an element of knowledge, but that element of knowledge has ignorance in its shadow. In other words, the situation right now may seem like something

you've encountered before, so you drag out what worked with what you encountered before, but, of course, it often turns out that it's not quite the same situation. There's a twist. This is why people have to go to psychotherapy. Lessons they learned in childhood, when they weren't really absorbing things carefully, they tend to hold on to even into adult life, reacting the same way.

But meditation is a willingness to say, "Is that presupposition right for right now? What *is* right for right now?" Learn to be flexible in that way and you'll find that your skill as a meditator will develop. Your sensitivity to what the actual situation is, your ingenuity in coming up with new ways of thinking, will grow. You'll be developing more presuppositions as you do this, but the hope is that you get more sensitive to when a particular idea or conception is helpful, when it gets in the way, learning how to read the situation to see what's needed. That's how your meditation grows.

After all, what is the meditation about? It's not about doing something you've read in a book or heard instructions about, and just following the instructions. It's learning how to handle your mind. All the issues in meditation are *your* issues. Some people come to meditation hoping to run away from their issues. But you can't run away from them. You bring them with you. What the meditation does is to teach you how to handle them.

In Thai, there's the word, *patibat*, which means to practice, but it also means to look after somebody. If you *patibat* your parents, you're taking care of them, looking after their needs. As many ajaans say, we're not here to *patibat* the religion, we're here to *patibat* ourselves, to look after our own minds, to take care of the specific issues we have. They tend to fall into large categories, like the hindrances or the categories of greed, anger and delusion. But you also begin to see in your mind that they have their own particular features, and whether or not you like their particular features, those are the ones you've got. So learn how to deal with them. As you face the particulars, you start to get into the bigger issues. They may be what you expected them to be, and they may not. But you're developing the ability to handle whatever comes up.

That's now the meditation is really useful. You're not trying to clone awakening. You're trying to explore possibilities. After all, awakening is going to be something very, very different from what you expect. So let's keep this principle of flexibility in mind.