

## *Judging Your Meditation*

*February 3, 2008*

Meditation is supposed to work. It's supposed to make a difference in your mind. It helps you to be more patient, more equanimous. It strengthens your powers of mindfulness, concentration, and discernment, and allows you to tap into sources of happiness and well-being that you might not be able to tap into otherwise. And yet often, when you begin to meditate, you're told that there's no such thing as good meditation or bad meditation, that you're not supposed to judge it.

So how do you know that it works? Well, the reason you're told not to judge it at the beginning is because beginning meditators are notoriously poor judges of what's going on in their minds. When we start out, we tend to be impatient. We don't know how to read our minds. So you're given a method and told to stick with it, to trust in the process.

But if the meditation is supposed to make you more patient, more discerning, then there should come a point where you can read your own mind, where you're not too impatient; you begin to get a sense of what's going on. And after a while you should be able to judge: Is this working for you, or not? That way, if it's not working, you can make changes.

This is why the Buddha didn't teach just one method of meditation. He taught different methods because different methods will work for different people. And also, different methods will work for the same person at different times. He taught breath meditation as home base. In other words, he didn't want you to be a dilettante, just flitting around from method to method as the mood struck you. He wanted you to put the mind in a place where it can look at itself. And the breath is a good place to do that, because the breath is very intimate with the mind. Of the different processes in your body, the one that's closest to the functioning of the mind is the breath. Greed arises in the mind, anger, or fear, and it's going to immediately have an effect on the breath. And then that effect spreads to other aspects of the body as well.

At the same time, the breath gives you something to play with. You can experiment with different kinds of breathing to see what impact they have on the mind. You see, sometimes, that the breath is not only a way of making you sensitive to the mind, but it also gives you tools for dealing with the mind, putting it back in shape when you find that it's out of shape. When the mind is feeling down, sometimes just some good, deep, in-and-out breathing, thinking of the

breath going to different parts of the body, can waken you up, freshen you up, put the mind in a much better mood. Or if the mind needs steadying, you can breathe down into your feet, into your hands, or the middle of the spine. That seems to transfix the mind into the body.

But there are times when the breath, on its own, is not enough. Which is why the Buddha taught other methods as well. When he taught his son, Rahula, how to meditate, he gave him ten different methods in addition to the breath: how to get the mind to settle down and be more patient, resilient; how to replace thoughts of ill will with goodwill, cruelty with compassion, resentment with empathetic joy, and irritation and aversion with equanimity; how to contemplate the body so as to overcome feelings of lust; and how to watch the inconstancy of everything in body and mind as a way of undercutting the conceit that you are this or you are that. So, the Buddha didn't have Rahula depend just on the breath.

At the same time, he taught him ways of learning how to judge what needs to be done. Part of this has to do with the teachings on karma. When I first went to practice meditation with Ajaan Fuang, there were a lot of different Buddhist teachings that I was curious and uncertain about. And I'd ask him about them. One day he finally said: "Look, there's only one thing you have to believe in to meditate, and that's karma." In other words, you *are* responsible for your actions, and the quality of your intentions *is* going to make a difference.

But you have to understand that the Buddha's understanding of karma is not the deterministic kind of teaching that many people think it is. And understanding karma helps you to understand and read your own mind. What you're experiencing right now is the combination of two sorts of things: the results of past actions, past intentions, as they're sprouting right now in the present. And the results of your intentions and actions right now. Which means that when something comes up in the meditation, it might be the result of what you're doing right now, and it might be the result of something you did in the past.

So you have to learn how to read that. Sometimes, as people start meditating, they uncover all kinds of things coming up in their minds and they blame the meditation. But it may simply be that the time has come for that particular past action to sprout right now. And the meditation allows you to see it, whereas otherwise, you might run away from it. So it's not the fault of the meditation, say, that anger suddenly appears in your mind, or greed or lust or fear. So you have to alert yourself to that issue. You have to be sensitive to this: Does it come from what you're doing right now, or does it come from the past?

This is why you have to meditate again and again: to test a particular technique in different situations. If you begin to see that every time you meditate, it does tend to stir up unskillful thoughts, maybe that's not the meditation technique for you. Especially if it doesn't give you a way of counteracting or separating yourself from those unskillful thoughts.

There was a case of some monks in the time of the Buddha doing contemplation of the body. They got so disgusted with their bodies that they started committing suicide or hiring assassins to kill them. The Buddha found out about this, called the remaining monks together, and said: "When unskillful mental states arise in the mind, go back to the breath." He said that breath meditation helps clear those unskillful states out of the mind in the same way that the first rains of the rain season clear all the dust out of the air.

So it is possible that even a good meditation technique, if misapplied, can cause problems.

So be sensitive to where a particular thought is coming from: Is it something just popping into the mind, or is it a result of what you're doing right now? One rule of thumb is that if a thought simply pops into the mind, that's probably the result of past karma. What you do in response to that thought: *That's* present karma. That's a good rule of thumb to start out with. You'll find that things are a little bit more complex as you get into them, but it's a good place to start.

Another important understanding about karma is that there's skillful karma and unskillful karma. Skillful karma leads to a sense of well-being that causes no harm either for yourself or for other people. It doesn't take anything away from them, and doesn't lead to increased greed, anger, or delusion in your own mind.

And it's important to understand that skillful karma, which is a skillful intention, is not the same thing as a good intention. Good intentions are well-meaning but they may be unskillful. They may be based on misunderstanding or larded with denial. In other words, what seems to be a good intention may simply be sheep's clothing over something else. The only way you're going to read that is by looking at the results of acting on your intentions.

This is why meditation is a kind of experimentation. You do something, and you watch for the results. Then you do it again and watch for the results again. Then you change things a little bit, to see if you get different results. Make comparisons.

Now, this does depend on the fact that you're beginning to get more patient and more sensitive to what's going on in the body and the mind—and that you're truthful with yourself. The Buddha once said that that was the primary

prerequisite for learning the Dharma: that you be truthful, both with other people and with yourself.

So when you have these qualities of patience and truthfulness, which hopefully you've developed through the meditation, you're in a much better position to read what's going on and to decide for yourself what's working and what's not. But, at the same time, keep those two principles of karma in mind: Sometimes what you're experiencing is the result of past karma, which you can't do much about, and sometimes it's the result of what you're doing right now, which you *can* do something about. That's what the meditation is all about. It's your karma in the present experimenting with different ways of dealing with pleasure, different ways of dealing with pain, to see what approaches give the best results. Over time, as a meditator, your powers of judgment should get more and more precise in this way.

This is one of the reasons why the Buddha included evaluation as part of right concentration. You start with something simple like the breath. You breathe in certain ways and notice the effect it has on the body, the effect it has on the mind. Then try breathing other ways to see what effect you get. You'll begin to notice that different ways of breathing are good in different situations. The body will have different breath needs even in the course of a single day. This is an ideal way of sensitizing yourself to what you're doing and the results of what you're doing right now. Which is why, of all the steps in breath meditation, the adjustment of the breath, working with the different breath energies in the body, is the one that takes the most time but also gives you the most lessons.

It's something you can play with for your whole life, keep learning new things about breath energy, new things about how the breath relates to the mind, how the mind relates to the breath, as you experiment and play.

Ajaan Suwat used to say meditation isn't something you just play with. Ajaan Fuang said you've got to play with it. But they were talking about two different kinds of play. Ajaan Suwat was referring to a desultory playing around without any purpose, which doesn't get you anywhere. Ajaan Fuang was talking about playing with a purpose: experimenting, exploring, trying to figure out what's most skillful. That kind of playing develops your powers of judgment, develops your powers of discernment, starting with the breath and then moving into the mind.

As those powers of discernment get more developed, you're in a better and better position to see that there is such a thing as good meditation, and there such a thing as a bad meditation session. And you've got the understanding, and the patience, and truthfulness, to become a better and better judge of when the meditation is working and when it's not, and what to do when it's not.

So, on the one hand, don't be too quick to judge your meditation, but on the other hand, try to develop the skills that will make you a reliable judge, so that your judgments are not judgmental, but are actually informative, helpful, and an aid on the path.