

Ingenuity

December 26, 2010

There are times when we look at the Buddha's teachings and they all seem so cut and dried, with neat lists for everything. But if you start looking at the lists, you begin to realize that they move around. You read one list and everything is nicely set out in order so that step A leads to step B, and then C, and D, and so on down the line. But then you read another list where D has moved up to the middle, A has moved back to the back, and other things are brought in, some things are left out, and you begin to realize things are not so cut and dried after all. There's wiggle room, room to play, room to improvise.

So when you look at the teachings, remember that they are basic principles, general principles, but in applying them in detail you've got to use your own ingenuity, your own ability to read what's working and what's not. If something's not working, can you think up another way of applying the principles that *would* work?

In other words, you don't throw out the principles, but you explore them, you probe them, think them through. As Ajaan Lee once said, "The ways of the mind are so many there's no way any book could ever contain them all"—and that doesn't apply to just one-volume books. In the Canon we've got forty-five books and they still don't contain all the ways of the mind.

So learn to appreciate this quality of ingenuity. It's one of the qualities the Buddha said you should look for in yourself as you practice and consciously try to develop. The Pali word for ingenuity, *patibhāna*, shows up in a lot of places as a good quality to develop together with your learning. There's nowhere, though, where the Buddha defines the term. So you have to be ingenious in figuring it out and how to develop it.

The things you've read, the things you've heard, provide one level of discernment, but then as you try to develop these things in the mind, that takes things to a whole new level. Sometimes what seems very simple as it's written down becomes a lot more complex when you actually try to apply it. Especially, as you try to apply different principles at the same time. On the one hand, there's the principle of goodwill, which the Buddha encourages you to have for everybody. But on the other hand, he says you have to be very selective in choosing your friends. Be very careful to hang out with people who are virtuous, who don't engage in unskillful actions, who don't engage in unskillful speech, who are

generous, wise, convinced of the possibility that we can gain awakening, that we can gain release through our own efforts. Those are the kind of people you want to hang around with.

So, having friendly thoughts for everybody is very different from actually having somebody as your friend. And at the same time, the Buddha says you don't want to become too entangled with people. So you've got to learn how to balance those principles out. Sort them out. Tease them out to see the best way to apply them.

The same principle applies to when you're sitting here with your eyes closed. Try to stay with the breath and, on the one hand, be as fully aware of just the sensation of the breath as you can and then, on the other hand, evaluate things, noticing how things are going. Is the breath a comfortable place to stay? Is it an interesting place to stay? What can you do to make it more comfortable? What can you do to make it more interesting? Ajaan Lee has lots of suggestions. There are some suggestions in the Canon. So you can try them out. See what way of focusing on the breath works for you right now. And learn how to balance the full-hearted doing with the evaluating.

As a meditator, you want to develop a repertoire of skills so that on the days when the mind is frazzled, you have the right way of breathing for a frazzled mind. On days when it's tired, you have the right way of breathing for a tired mind. On days when it's scattered about, what way of breathing is best for a scattered mind? These are things you want to learn through exploration. How much thinking and observing is good? How much of simply allowing the mind to be still is good? These are things you learn through trial and error.

So, ingenuity is more of an art than a science in the sense that you have some freedom and it's important that you exercise that freedom. All too often, we think of insight as learning how to force the mind into a mold. The books say you want to see this or that insight, that you want to see inconstancy, stress, not-self. And if you make up your mind you're going to see things in that way, it's possible to make yourself see things that way—or at least have a good imitation. The question is, though, is that imitation really helpful? The whole purpose of these things is not to brainwash you or to get you to agree to a certain set of propositions. It's more to help you see what's going on in the mind, to see where you're creating suffering and how you can stop.

And particularly, because we have such a passion for creating suffering or holding on to things that make us suffer, we want to learn how to apply the basic principles of the Buddha's teachings to help develop some dispassion for that suffering, so that we can let go, we can stop this continual production of suffering

and suffering all the time. How can we begin to see that it's not really worth it?

That's what those perceptions are for. Sometimes seeing that all those things that you're holding onto are inconstant and unreliable will really hit home. Other times it's the insight into the stress they involve, that they're like a disease, like an arrow that's been shot into your heart. And who's doing the shooting? You're doing the shooting. Why do you do it? Because you're not really paying attention, you don't see the connections. Sometimes the perception of not-self or the perception of emptiness will hit home.

There are lots of different ways of developing dispassion. The tools are there not for you to say, "Oh yes, this is the way things are: inconstant, stress, not-self. What's next?" That's not the point. The point is trying to get the mind still enough so that it can really see what's going on and then figure out a way of developing dispassion for the causes of suffering. And to see what's going on, you've got to see connections between cause and effect—and this is where the ingenuity, the improvisation comes in. You try this and watch what happens. Then you try that and watch what happens.

Years back when I was reading Kurt Vonnegut, I came across a passage where he says, "Scientists are like little kids, they like to play around. And actually they've been lucky, as they grow up they can find someone to pay them to play around." But that's how we develop knowledge: playing around.

And it's the same with the breath. Play with the breath, experiment: deeper breathing, shorter breathing, more shallow breathing, longer breathing. Think of the breath coming in and out through all your pores. Think of it coming in and out specific parts of the body that tend to be starved of breath energy. Notice how different ways of breathing affect the state of your mind, how they affect your general health.

The basic principles are there in the books but the lessons you learn are lessons you're going to have to learn on your own. The Buddha's simply teaching you how to explore, to give you some general criteria for knowing when you've come across something really good. So it's not a matter of blindly following instructions. You follow the instructions and if something doesn't work, you adjust things here, adjust things there, see how much adjusting falls within the principles and how much adjusting takes you beyond them. And it's in your willingness to explore that you can learn.

I had a student once who insisted that he wanted to be told just what to do. Perhaps he'd read too many stories of the young student who goes to see the old master and the old master says, "Ah, yes, you need to focus on this." That's all the student has to do, just focus on that and, bonk, guaranteed awakening. But if

meditation did have foolproof methods like that, we'd still be fools, even after awakening. We'd never learn to take responsibility for ourselves and never learn how to think outside the box.

Remember, the Buddha himself wasn't thinking inside the box as he explored the way to awakening. He exhausted all the possibilities that everybody taught at that time, and then he had to try other things. Finally, it was when he was willing to think outside the box that he found the way. He realized that maybe the state of concentration he'd fallen into as a child—rapture and pleasure born of seclusion, accompanied by directed thought and evaluation—might be the path. So he tried it. But remember, there was still a question mark there, built into the word, “might.” Could this be the path? And even though there was that conviction that it could be the path, he had to test it.

Then, when you've developed that testing mind, you'll know when something passes the test or doesn't pass the test. Those methods that tell you okay, do this, and don't think, and just follow the method: When you get a result, you have to take it to the teacher, and then the teacher will tell you Yes or No. But you're not being responsible. You're not held responsible.

The techniques you want are those that give you some specific instructions so that you know you're not totally lost, but they'll also give you enough room to be responsible and encourage you to test things. When the results come, you'll have the ability to judge are these really good, or not.

That's why the quality of ingenuity—improvisation, using your imagination—is absolutely central to the path.