

Always Willing to Learn

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One of the habits of a good craftsman is a willingness to deal with uncertainties. You take the range of skills you've developed and you're willing to apply them to new situations, new problems. You experiment. And you deal skillfully with failure. You try again until you can see how the basic principles of your skill can be extended in that particular set of circumstances, to that particular set of problems.

The same principle applies to meditation. You may find as you're dealing with the breath energy in the body that there are parts of the body you have trouble integrating into your range of healthy breath energy. So you have to learn how to think about those parts in new ways. If you try to push them out of you or ignore them, they don't go away. They come back with a vengeance. So learn to think about them in ways that can include them in the breath.

For example, if there's tension in your neck or your shoulders, think of the neck and shoulders actually doing the breathing, and they're breathing just for themselves. The fact that they're tense may mean that they've been breathing for other parts of the body, while they themselves are starved. So let them have their fill of breath energy. Often, if areas of the body have been starved of breath energy, you'll have to start out with lots of deep long in-breaths and shallow out-breaths to get them re-energized. Be careful not to squeeze those areas on the out-breath. Let them do the breathing, and for the time being it's fully for their benefit.

If your brain feels foggy, you can think of the breath energy coming in and out of the brain, that the brain is doing the breathing. Or the spinal cord is doing the breathing. See what that does to the breath energy—if it helps to open things up or to strengthen parts of the body that are weak. If it doesn't work, experiment to see what *does* work. As a meditator you always want to be expanding your range of skills, consolidating what you've learned and then seeing how it can grow.

In doing so, you find that you expand your sense of who you are, of what you can do, of what's possible. But that sense of who you are: Don't focus primarily on that. We have ways of typecasting ourselves: You fall here or there on the enneagram; you're a smart person, a dumb person, a sensitive person, a clod, or whatever. If you think in those terms, you tend to limit yourself. What those types are, are the areas you tend to fall back on, the range of skills you're already comfortable with. But you don't want to be limited to those skills. You have to be willing to deal with uncertainties, which means being willing to develop new skills.

There are certain roles that you're comfortable filling, but things can't progress if you stay limited to those roles. You can't let your desire for self-esteem limit you just to the things you already know how to do well. It's a common tendency: When you see that you can do something well, you can pat yourself on the back that you handled that situation well from that angle. But

maybe you handled it poorly from another angle. That's an area you don't like to look at because it doesn't feed your self-esteem. And that way, you stay blind.

Or you're used to certain patterns in your emotional life. Like patterns in the weather, they seem natural because they're the ones you're used to. When I was younger, I lived back East. Like everywhere east of the Rocky Mountains, the heat during the summer would build and build and build, and then there would be a huge thunderstorm. The heat and humidity would be dispersed, and things cooled down. You got used to thinking that that's the way it has to be—the heat and humidity build into a thunderstorm that clears everything. Now you live here in California, and the summers aren't like that at all. When the cool air comes in, it comes in stealthily, very quietly. You go through a heat wave and then one morning you wake up: Fog. It crept in overnight without warning, with no clear line to tell you, "Now the heat is going to break." It's a different pattern.

We need to realize in our lives that some of the patterns we're used to are unhealthy, or they may be useful in some circumstances but not in others. So it's good to learn other ways of dealing with these patterns. Instead of trying to think of what kind of person you are or where you fit on a particular scale, just look at your range of skills and ask if you can expand that range. Look at things from different perspectives. For instance, if you're used to thinking of yourself as smart, it's useful to live in a set of circumstances where other people don't think that you're smart. At first you may find it debilitating, because your self-esteem has been built up around the idea that you're smart. But the idea that you're smart can get in the way of learning new things. You have to get past that sense of being debilitated, and realize, well, maybe you *are* dumb in certain areas.

The way to do this is to identify yourself as someone always willing to learn. That provides you with a wider range of places where you can stay, a wider range of groups you can live with, and a wider range of ways you can look at yourself and the situations you're in. The wider your range of skills, the easier it is to survive. Your survival doesn't have to depend on other people recognizing the fact that you're smart, or even *your* thinking you're smart.

Or suppose you're used to being angry, going through a certain pattern like the summer storm pattern—the anger gradually builds, gradually builds, and then a storm clears the air—and you're used to that effect, the idea that really feeling the anger fully and expressing it fully is going to clear the air. What actually happens, of course, is that you end up doing and saying things that are harmful to yourself and to people around you, just as storms can cause a lot of damage. You've got to ask yourself: What other ways are there of dealing with the situation? Do you really need to clear the air with anger? Does it actually clear the air? Might it not be better to go back to the very beginning stages of the anger and watch them to see how you can nip the anger in the bud, so the anger can be defused in a subtle way like the fog stealing in?

These skills we learn as we meditate—watching thought patterns arise and learning how to nip them in the bud—are an important part of the meditation. We like to think that real meditation is when you settle down with the breath, with no distractions, and the mind doesn't wander off anywhere. But learning how to deal with distraction is one of the major learning opportunities in the meditation: seeing how the distraction begins, how there's a little stirring in the mind and then, depending on what you want, how you place a meaning on that stirring and get attracted to it, involved in it. It becomes a little movie you want

to follow and then you're off wherever it takes you. But if you want to stick with the meditation, you need to see those processes right as they begin forming and to figure out ways of nipping them in the bud: questioning the perception, dispersing that little stirring of energy with the breath, getting more alert to what's actually happening, and more mindful of what you really want to be doing with the process.

Which means that, in learning how to deal with distractions, you learn an awful lot about how the mind works, how states of becoming arise. Then you take this skill and use it in daily life. When you run up against patterns in yourself and your relationships to the people around you—as in that old book, *Games People Play*—you have to ask yourself what games *you* like to play: the games you feel comfortable playing, the ones you feel you can play well. Are they really good games to play? If not, how can you pull out of those games? That's an important range of skills to develop.

And again, as you're meditating, learn which areas of the Dhamma apply to which phase of the emotional waves you go through. In the beginning stages where the wave is still subtle, you can apply the four noble truths: look for the stress, look for the craving and the clinging, and do what you can to let go of that craving and clinging. You need to do this early, for if you let the wave develop to a crest, to the point where you're in the middle of a rage, this subtle type of analysis is not going to work. The only thing you can do then is to use defilement to undercut your defilement.

There's that great passage in the suttas where the Buddha advises, when you're really angry, to stop and think of how, when you're angry, you tend to do and say things that are self-destructive, that destroy your friendships, that destroy your wealth, that hurt your best interests. When you're angry, you don't look good. All of these are things that will please your enemy. Do you want to please that bastard? Thinking in this way uses your pride and hatred to undercut your anger. When things have developed to a full-blown level like that, the subtle teachings aren't going to help. You have to use crude wisdom—which means that even though it works, the results are going to be crude as well.

So it's best not to let your emotional waves develop that far. Ask yourself: What happened to all those skills you learned as a meditator? They're not just for sitting quietly on a meditation seat. They're for use in your daily life, to take you out of the unskillful games you've been playing, to give you a wider range of actual skills. So look at your life: What in your daily life tends to provoke anger? Watching TV? Listening to the radio? Well, maybe you should watch less TV. Turn off the radio. There is that principle called restraint of the senses, you know. When you look at things that provoke anger, it's often not the case that the things actually provoke your anger. You're out looking for anger because you want the storm. But what does the storm really accomplish, aside from a lot of damage?

Learn how to look at the people you dislike in a different way. Learn to think about the situations that would normally provoke anger in a different way. If you find that you can't look at the news without getting angry, it means you can't look at the news yet. You're not ready for it. If you want to get involved in social action, learn how to look at the news in a way that gives you ideas for what could be done, but without the anger. It's possible to recognize injustice and to work for change without getting stirred to anger. When you don't get stirred up in anger, you can work more effectively.

This applies in your personal life as well, in your relationships with people right around you. They may do things you dislike, but instead of letting yourself get upset, ask yourself: What would be the most effective way of stopping that kind of behavior? The most effective way is rarely the route of anger. There are more subtle ways, more indirect ways, that are much more effective, much more lasting. But they're not going to occur to you if you're boiling over with indignation.

You may come to realize that you actually use the injustice or the wrong situation to play a game of anger. So start questioning your motives. Is it really the injustice you care about, or is it the charge of the anger? This way you bring the range of skills you develop in meditation into your daily life. You'll probably see things about yourself that you don't like, but hopefully the meditation should have put you in a position where you're ready to face those things maturely and deal with them skillfully.

This is why, when the Buddha taught Rahula how to meditate on the breath, he first taught him to develop the perception of inconstancy. As he said, if you focus on inconstancy, it helps to deconstruct the conceit that "I am." Now, ordinarily we think of conceit as one of the last things you abandon in the practice. It's a fetter that only arahants can abandon totally. But you want to learn how to question it right from the very beginning because it often gets in the way of the skills you could be developing as a meditator or applying to new situations in life. When you can let go of that conceit—even though you can't totally conquer it, at least put it out of your mind for the time being—it allows you to look at situations less in terms of what you are, and more in terms of what you can do with the range of skills at hand.

And do what you can to expand that range of skills. Ajaan Lee talks about knowing when to play the role of being a smart person, knowing when to play the role being a dumb person. The same with strength and weakness: Most people don't like to appear weak, but there are times when it's useful to play the weak role. You learn a lot about other people that way. What this means is that you want to be able to play both the weak role and the strong role whenever necessary.

Last week I was talking to a woman who was dealing with a difficult situation at work. She had begun to realize that it just wasn't worth keeping up the fight, that she'd be better off quitting the job. But part of her didn't like the idea, for she was going to look like a loser. She liked to think of herself as a warrior. Well, that's a very incomplete understanding of what it means to be a warrior. A good warrior knows which battles are worth fighting and which ones aren't. It's when you're really confident in yourself as a warrior that you're willing to look weak or demure when you know it's to your advantage to do so. In other words, you're willing to play lots of different roles—and to learn how to expand your skills in all the different games you might be playing with other people so you're not stuck in the same old narrow range of games, narrow range of skills. You're able to take on different identities as they are appropriate for the occasion.

This is a principle that applies to the outside area of your daily life and also to the inside area of your meditation. Learn how to live with uncertainties, with the confidence that you can learn from them and expand your skills. It's an important step toward freedom, this ability to expand your range. If you need a

working hypothesis about who you are, what kind of person you are, make it the kind of person always willing to learn. That sort of identity doesn't set you up for a fall. In fact, it aids you all along the path. But once you realize that it's the identity you want to take on, make sure that your attitudes really carry it out.