

The No Common Sense Zone

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Those instructions that the Buddha gave to Rahula, at the very beginning of his time as a monk, are basically instructions on approaching the practice as a skill. You make up your mind that you're going to try to act skillfully. Then you figure out what to do, try to do it, watch for the results while you're doing it. If you find something's coming out not the way you wanted it, you stop. If things seem to be coming the way you want, you continue. And then when they're done, you look at what you've got.

When you're learning a physical skill—whether it's carpentry, flower arranging, or cooking—"what you've got" means the object you're working on. Take cooking, for example: You first make up your mind you're going to make a good ratatouille, then you taste it while you're doing it, and then you taste it again when it's done.

The same when you make a chest of drawers: While you're working on it, you have to pass judgment on your actions as to whether they're what you intended or not. Or if what you intended is not working out, you try something else. Then when the object is done, you examine it and see what you can learn from it. When the object is what you wanted it to be, you've reached your goal.

We're doing something similar with the breath, the difference being that even though the breath is our object, it's not our goal. Our goal is the mind. We want the mind to settle down. What kind of breathing will help? You try things out. You try chest breathing, you try abdominal breathing, you try breathing all the way down to your toes. Which feels good? Which do you find easiest to settle down on? How about longer or shorter breathing? Faster or slower? Think of the breath penetrating all the way deep into your brain. Think of it penetrating into your bones. What way of thinking about the breath is easiest to stay with?

As you do this, you learn a lot. In particular, you're learning how to learn. You're learning about cause and effect, both in the mind and the body. This is important because, when the Buddha gave his most succinct summary of what he awakened to, it was the principle of cause and effect. "When there is this, there is that. When this isn't, that isn't. From the arising of this comes the arising of that. From the cessation of this comes the cessation of that."

Sounds pretty abstract. But he's boiling down a principle that he tested by seeing which kinds of actions lead to good results and which kinds don't, and from there, seeing what kind of actions lead you outside of normal cause and effect, lead to the end of action.

That's the big skill right there, but to get to that big skill you have to work on the little ones. What kind of breathing feels good right now? Could it feel better? As you work with this, don't let yourself get discouraged. Use your powers of observation, use your ingenuity, on little things like this: the same way that you work with hammers and saws when you're building a hut, needle and thread when you're making flower arrangements, flour and butter when you're baking a cake. You learn more than just about the needle and the thread and the flour and the butter and the hammers and the saws. You learn a lot about the mind. You learn a lot about your body.

The Buddha starts with the principle of working with little things like the breath, trying to settle down with the breath. To do it with care means care with each breath, in the same way as when you're folding banana leaves for a floral offering: You fold each banana leaf, you pay total attention to the banana leaf you're working on right now. You find that by staying absorbed in the small immediate task, the larger task gets done.

Then, as you develop the basic skills, you can play with them. It's in the playing around that you learn even more about cause and effect in the mind and the body. This is how the bigger lessons come about.

This is so different from the normal way we in America approach spiritual practice. Years back, I was reading a book where the author made the point that, regardless of what the religion or denomination of religious thought in America, it all came down to Methodism: the belief that if your heart was good, that's all that mattered. You don't have to

think much. You don't have to study or understand anything much. When your heart is good, you can just follow your instincts. Everything else will just follow in being good. People carry that into Buddhism. If you get in touch with your already-awakened mind, they say, then you don't have to think much. Just get in touch with your awakened mind and you'll know instinctively what to do.

But that doesn't help you learn anything, because what may instinctively feel right right now, is it really right? And, of course, you can't learn from any one moment as to what will be right for the next moment. So there's no learning going on, no heedfulness. If you tried that approach with carpentry or baking or flower arranging, you'd end up with a mess. Especially the idea that you can instinctively just get in touch with your awakened nature, then you don't have to think about what you're going to do or say or think, because it will all flow naturally: It's a No Common Sense Zone.

That was one of the things that was so bracing about meeting Ajaan Fuang, because everything was very commonsense, down to earth. But it wasn't small-minded: a very large mind and heart had developed as a result—large in the sense of being compassionate, wise, and skillful in what he did and said and thought. But it started from the little things, not overlooking the little things. Because it's through the quality of careful attention that you really learn.

So remember, we're working on a skill here. It requires common sense. It will take you ultimately to a place beyond common sense, but it's not below common sense. Below common sense is when you just say, "Well, I'll go with my feelings." And however you interpret the source of those feelings as to why they should be trusted: That leads nowhere.

But the path—and that's why the Buddha gave the image of the path to begin with—does lead someplace. The raft takes you across the river. The path takes you to a goal. And as we all know about walking along a path, if you're very careful about each step, you don't trip, you don't stumble. You're not thinking too much about the goal. You're paying attention to this step and this step and this step, secure in your knowledge that they're headed toward the goal.

If you pay a lot of attention right here, right now, it takes you far. So stay with each breath, each breath, each breath. Try to develop a sensitive touch, because it's in that sensitivity to little things that larger discernment arises. And it's through that sort of discernment that there comes release.