

# *Practicing Your Scales*

*October 19, 2006*

Developing skill as a meditator is very similar to developing skill as a musician. You start out with the scales—say you're learning the piano—and you want to play beautiful music, but they have you playing these dumb scales and it can be pretty boring. But if you don't stick with the scales, you can't play the music. Over time, as you develop your ear, you begin to realize that there really is a skill to running your fingers up those notes. One of the signs of a really good pianist is his ability to make his runs sound like water, totally effortless—and yet a lot of effort goes into getting there.

It's the same with the meditation. Meditation is work, and there's a lot of grunt work in just getting the mind to settle down and stay still. It's important that you not get bored by it. You sit here with the breath and sometimes it seems like it's the hardest place to stay. The mind is off someplace else, and you've got to pull it back. It stays for a breath or two, and then it's off someplace else again. You've got to pull it back. It's the pulling back that's an important part of the meditation. That's mindfulness and alertness in action. That's directed thought and evaluation in action. Directed thought means just keeping your thoughts with the breath. In the process of strengthening those qualities in the mind, that's when you develop the foundation for good concentration practice.

So there are two ways of meditating. One is just sitting here hoping that you'll hit the lottery, because there are times when things just come together on their own. But that can get frustrating, just wondering what tonight's meditation lottery is going to be like. Are you going to come in first, are you going to come in last? There's no skill there at all. The other way of approaching it is to realize there's work to be done. It may not be fun, but keep reminding yourself that this is how good meditation is built. This is how you develop an understanding of the mind, by understanding that process of how the mind slips off.

It's really amazing. The mind can create all kinds of thought worlds for itself. How does it do that? How does it conduct its discussion of where it's going to go, how it's going to get there? And then how does it cover all that up, so you don't notice it? It all seems to happen just on its own, but if you can see into that, you learn an awful lot about the mind. You learn about ignorance, for one thing, which is the big cause of suffering. You learn about craving: What does the mind crave as it's creating these worlds? It's craving pleasure. It can be sensual pleasure: the idea of thoughts of beautiful things, thoughts of nice-sounding things, so on down the line. Or it's craving a sense of identity that comes in with this, when you're in the world—you're functioning in a world here—fighting off annihilation, you fear that if there are no thoughts in the mind, the mind is just going to disappear, your awareness is going to disappear. As long as you're thinking and knowing the results of your thoughts, you know you exist. And there is the potential for happiness there. We learn at a very early age that by developing a sense of self, we can use it to provide for pleasure in one way or another. If we were deprived of that sense of self—and this is why so many of us resist the idea of letting go of that sense of self—we'd feel that we'd be deprived

of our potential for pleasure, or of the sense of self that's experiencing the pleasure. The craving for this kind of identity is called craving for becoming.

So just in this process of the mind creating thought worlds, you see a lot about ignorance and craving, and all the other factors of dependent co-arising. You watch them in action. It's all happening right here. But instead of having to memorize the lists of dependent co-arising, the best way to learn about these things is just to get your hands dirty, deal with the causal chains that go on in the mind, and learn how to cut them. You'll find that you cut them in different spots depending on how quickly you notice what's going on. This way you learn about the mind. You learn about the processes in the mind in the same way that you learn about eggs by cooking with them; or you learn about a piano by sitting down and playing it, seeing what you can get out of it, what kind of sounds, what kind of satisfaction.

So it's important, as you sit down and meditate, that you realize you're not here just for stress relaxation, stress reduction, or for chilling out. There is work to be done. This is your concentration work, as Ajaan Lee called it: the directed thought and evaluation, keeping your mind with the breath and learning to watch it, to see which ways of breathing help keep you there with the breath, alert and mindful; which ways of breathing make your restless. You learn this through the evaluation, i.e., evaluating times when the mind gets restless and wanders off. Go back and say, "Okay, gotta try something else." You've got to be willing to learn, and it can be frustrating. Any learning experience involves some pain, some effort and frustration, and your ability to deal emotionally with the frustration is what's going to see you through.

So learn how to give yourself pep talks. You have to keep yourself up for the practice. This is why there are times when it's useful to reflect on the Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Sangha. What kind of person was the Buddha who found this path of practice? Everything indicates that he was an extremely truthful person, very realistic, always willing to learn. And he taught purely out of compassion. After his awakening, he didn't need anything from anybody. If there wasn't enough food to keep his body going, he would be perfectly happy to die, because he'd already found a deathless happiness. So the fact that he kept the body going, kept having to deal with people forty-five years, was a total act of compassion.

And the Dhamma he taught, as they say, was totally heartwood. In other words, there wasn't a lot of rhetoric, a lot of unnecessary teachings. He focused on the big issue in life: Why is there suffering? Why do people create suffering for themselves when they want happiness? What can they do to learn to put an end to that suffering? And he focused on that issue in a way that's still very relevant thousands of years later.

As for the Sangha, he instituted an order where people live totally on gifts. The Buddha's teaching was a gift. The way the Sangha is arranged, monks live on gifts. They don't sell the teaching, they don't have to raise kids, meet mortgage payments, all the other things that would crimp their style of really being true to the Dharma. You look at the stories in the *Theragatha* and *Therigatha*, telling of the monks and the nuns struggling with their meditation, and some of them were in a lot worse places than you are right now. And yet they were able to gain awakening. So that gives you encouragement that it can be done. Not just amazing people like the Buddha who can do it, all kinds of people

can do it.

When you reflect on these things, it gives you encouragement for the practice. This is one of the reasons why the Buddha also prefaced meditation practice with practicing generosity and observing the precepts. As you follow the Buddha's teachings in ways that are simpler and easier to follow and see the results that come, it gives you confidence in the teaching: that even though some of the instructions may seem counterintuitive, they work. When you come to the practice fortified by these practices and fortified by your understanding of where this teaching came from, that can help get you over the dry periods when all you seem to be doing is dragging your mind back and forth, back and forth, back and forth, up and down the notes of the piano.

But that sense of confidence has to be augmented also by your willingness to be observant. There's a book in our library on learning how to swim. It's there not because the monks are planning to swim, but because it describes the learning process so well. It talks about how to practice swimming, and the principles apply to any kind of skill that when you're practicing. You don't just go through the motions or put in the time. You have to observe what's the most efficient way of getting through the water. How do you hold your head, how do you watch your stroke to see how you can make your stroke more efficient, so you can use less energy and at the same time go faster, go longer? It's the same way with working on those scales: What's the most efficient way of holding your hands, your arms, your torso to get the best-sounding notes out of the piano? This way, what in the beginning is a very effortful process really does become effortless as you streamline your understanding of what you are doing.

It's the same with the meditation. You find that you have to learn how to streamline your understanding of what it means to keep the mind focused. You start out by basically doing too much: You tense up the body, you engage all kinds of other parts of the mind to try to keep the mind here, and yet you can't maintain that amount of tension. The mind is sure to slip off. Then you try to have no effort at all, and of course it's going to slip off again. What you've got to do is notice, "Which part of the effort is necessary, which part is not? Where's the excess energy that's being expended on this that's making it more difficult than it has to be? What's the most efficient way of staying with the breath? What's the most efficient place to focus? The most efficient way of understanding the breath that helps you stay there so that the amount of effort you put into each moment of meditation is totally possible, totally sustainable? That way you really do develop a sense of ease with being with the breath. So you've got to be observant.

It's in this way that directed thought and evaluation eventually lead to a sense of ease, even a sense of rapture, and the mind can really settle down. Because it's not just a matter of forcing, but it's also a matter of understanding what you're doing and looking through that lens of where's the unnecessary stress, where's the unnecessary amount of effort that's being expended? When is the effort too much, when is too little, when is it just right?

This is why only so much of the meditation can be taught in terms of words saying, "Do this, do that," the technique they tell you to do. A lot of it has to come from your own input, your own willingness to observe, to learn from your mistakes. The process is not necessarily pleasant, but it's the only way to learn. And it has the advantage that it develops your powers of perception, your powers

of discernment while you do it.

So just as when you learn how to play the scales well, you're learning a lot of the other skills you are going to need to play music well, in the same way when you learn how to keep the mind with one object in spite of all those other temptations to create worlds that you want to inhabit, you're learning the precise skills that are needed to get the mind to settle down. You're learning the skills that enable you to understand the workings of the mind. This is what's meant by that saying that the path and the goal are not different. In other words, in doing the path well, you find right there in the doing of the path that the goal starts to appear.

So don't just put in the time, saying, "I hope I win the lottery this time when the results will come on their own." You've got to watch, you've got to observe, you've got to be willing to learn. Even if it means going back and relearning the steps that you think that only beginners have to do, everybody has to learn these things many times over. And the more attention you pay to them, the more lessons you learn.