

Testing Insights

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Ajaan Lee once compared meditating to walking. You have a left foot and you have a right foot, and they take turns stepping. The left foot is like concentration; the right foot is like discernment. You need them both all the way along. The concentration is the doing, the discernment is the watching and the evaluating.

As in his instructions to Rahula: He said you have to evaluate what you're doing all the time as you're doing it—before, during and after. In the same way, you have to learn how to evaluate your concentration practice as you do it. First you do it and then you look at it. Then you do it some more, and you look at some more, in the same way that you step left, right, left, right, left, right. Some people have the idea that you do nothing but concentration and then nothing but discernment, as if you're going to hop along on your left foot for a while and then on your right foot for a while, which is very strenuous way of trying to get anywhere.

So you alternate. When you emphasize the concentration, the emphasis is finding a good comfortable place to stay, settling in, and staying there, without asking too many questions. Where is this going to go? Don't ask. Just stay with it. Even then, there's an element of discernment as you adjust, because getting the mind to a particular spot and then keeping it there are two different processes. They're alike in some ways, but not in others. The trick, once you've discovered a good comfortable place for the mind to stay, is knowing which things you have to keep on doing in order to keep it there, and how to make sure your desire to stay there doesn't get in the way of actually staying in place.

So even in the process of getting the mind to be still, getting the mind to be concentrated, there already has to be an element of discernment.

Then, once you really are settled in there—you've gotten to the point where you're skilled at getting the mind into that state, getting it to stay there, getting it settled in—then see if you can keep it there as long as you like, while you're sitting in meditation.

Then the next step is to keep it in that state in other activities, whatever you're doing, because that's when you begin to see exactly how comfortable that state really is. In other words, a state may seem really comfortable for a while, but if you stick at it long enough, you may begin to see, "Ah, there is some discomfort here."

So as when you're dealing with the breath, you have a certain way of conceiving the breath, it helps you settle down, and you can stay there for a while.

But then if you drop it, you never really know how long it was going to stay comfortable, when it was going to start showing signs of stress. In that way, you become a tourist meditator. You dip in a little bit, and you have a nice little tourist experience, and then you dip out. You come in again, then you're out again. You never gain the kind of understanding that comes from really living in a location.

But if you stick with one way of dealing with the breath, you begin to see that it's not always comfortable. There is still an element of stress. Okay, what do you do next? You learn to play with it, make adjustments: in the breath, in the mind. This is precisely what you do with discernment in the larger sense. You need the continuity of concentration in order to see the subtleties of stress that are there even in very still states of mind. Without that continuity, they don't show.

When you start seeing them, then the question is: What do you do next? Well, you play with your concentration, to see exactly where you're causing stress in the mind. In the course of playing with the breath, you start gaining insights. This is where you have to be careful. Heedfulness is the beginning of wisdom: Remember that. That's what enables you to learn how to rely on yourself in the practice—if you can train yourself to be heedful, watchful. One of the difficulties in teaching meditation is that, on the one hand, the teacher wants to give as much information as possible to help people along the path, but not so much that people become dependent on the teacher for everything. They need to learn how to evaluate things for themselves.

Through evaluating the breath, you gain some insights. Then you've got to evaluate your insights, especially when you gain insights that are based on concentration, because they can be extremely convincing. When you've developed the kind of bullheadedness that's needed to keep the mind on one object, that bullheadedness then becomes a problem when you start getting insights. You're totally convinced of the truth of whatever insight you have.

There was a monk I knew who had been off meditating alone in the forest. He came to the realization that everything already is Dhamma, already as it is, and you shouldn't touch it, you shouldn't change it, you shouldn't make any adjustments at all to the way the world is. That was his great Dhammic realization. He came back to society and he was going to teach it to the world. But he ran into people in the world who were making changes. There were women who were wearing makeup, for one thing. This person was trying to change that; that person was trying to change this. He got really upset with these people for trying to change things. Of course, *he* wanted to change *them*. He didn't reflect on himself.

After a while he came to see Ajaan Fuang, and Ajaan Fuang very gently pointed this out to him. That was when he was able to let go.

The lesson I learned from all that was that when insights come while you're out there in the forest, meditating alone, you've got to watch out, because things can be really true, you can gain true insights, but it's possible to see them from only one side. So I was struck when I read a passing comment in one of Ajaan Lee's Dhamma talks. He said that whenever you gain any insight, turn it inside out. In other words, if your insight says A, then turn it around and see: What about not-A? To exactly what extent would that be a true and useful insight? Then once you've explored A and not-A, you start looking at: What are the assumptions that underlie both A and not-A? Can you learn how to question those assumptions? In this way, you don't develop a too one-sided attitude toward your insights—because insights have their time and they have their place, but then there are times and places where they're not appropriate.

There's a teaching on what are called the seven qualities of a person of integrity: There first three are having a sense of the Dhamma, having a sense of its meaning, having a sense of time and place. This is an aspect of wisdom: knowing when a particular insight applies and when it doesn't apply. A good way of checking that is to follow Ajaan Lee's advice: Once you gain an insight and have a realization, turn it inside out, turn it around, look at the opposite of that particular insight.

This way, your insights don't become an obstacle to deeper insight. You learn to look at them, not as ultimate truths but as tools, which is what they are. Remember: Insight is part of the path, not the goal. All too many people think that we're here to gain particular insights and we stop there. That's not the case. You gain insights and you put them to use for the sake of release: That's the goal.

You have to look at everything in terms of cause and effect—as when you look at concentration. First learn how to do it, then notice what kind of effect it's having on the mind. If it's not having good effects, adjust your concentration. In the course of adjusting your concentration, you're going to get insights. Again, look at the effect those insights have on your mind. See them as part of a causal process, too. See them as tools. Remember, some tools work fine in some conditions, and others work well in other situations. You don't go around with just a hammer in your hand all the time. You hold the hammer when you need to hit a nail, then you put it down. You pick up a screwdriver when you need to screw a screw. Then you put that down.

In other words, you don't have to go lugging your insights around. If they really are useful, they'll be there. The powers of concentration will keep the mind

still enough and open enough, so that all the little nooks and crannies where those insights got placed stay open. When you need the insight, it'll come to you because you've got the mind still.

So if you want to become a self-reliant meditator, one thing you have to learn is how to depend on yourself to get the mind still. A second thing is to learn how to depend on yourself to test your insights. This is one of the things I find so amazing about Ajaan Mun, who went out in the forest and practiced alone for years and years and years. Many people practice alone in the forest and get kind of weird. But he didn't. He gained awakening. It was because he was such a relentless examiner of what was going on in his mind. He wouldn't accept anything unless he'd really put it to the test. He made himself the sort of person who was qualified to put things to the test, too, to develop the powers of his concentration, his alertness, and his own honesty.

So as meditators, this is what we need to work on. We can't go around depending on books, depending on teachers to do everything for us. We have to become the kind of people who can test things for themselves. This requires developing a lot of qualities such as heedfulness, as we chanted just now: respect for concentration, respect for heedfulness, realizing that your actions are important. You have to be very careful, because it's so easy to slip off in the wrong direction.

When I look back at my time with Ajaan Fuang, one of the things I really appreciated in the training that he gave me was that he really worked on making me self-reliant. The beginning of that was to strip down all of my conceit that I carried in from outside world and to replace it with a sense of confidence that comes from being really relentless in honesty, relentless in heedfulness, checking things again and again and again, not being willing to take anything for granted.

So I started out in his training, confident in one way, then came out of his training confident in a very different way. The second way was a lot more solid, because it involves testing things, but also training myself to be the sort of person who was qualified to test things. That takes work; it takes vigilance. But these are qualities we can all develop, which is why those passages in the Canon where the Buddha talks about ways of testing yourself, ways of testing teachers, ways of testing teachings, are the heart of the Dhamma. They're the heart of the practice.

It's this willingness to test things that gives rise to insight, and the insights again have to be tested to the point where they really do give rise to release. Then you know you've got what you're looking for. It's not simply a matter of faith. It's a matter of having tested your way all the way to release, testing yourself all the way to the real thing.