

Specifics

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We look at the same thing every night: the mind looking at the breath. And hope we hope to see something new, either in the mind or in the breath. It's like a route you take over and over again. It's so easy to stop noticing things: the same interchanges, the same restaurants, the same scenery. After a while, you lapse into a blurred state of not being very observant. That can happen.

So try to fight that tendency. Each breath is a new breath. There's a possibility of seeing something in each breath that you haven't seen before. No matter how much you've learned about the breathing process in the past, there's always more to learn. Look at all those talks at Ajaan Lee gave on different ways of conceiving the breath, seeing the breath. Part of it is having an experimental approach to the breath, trying new things and thinking of new things to try.

It's an important part of the meditation, this ingenuity in dealing with problems, because often we'll come across what seem to be the same problems over and over again. Maybe a pain in the body. Impatience. Lack of energy. Whatever the issue maybe. You try one approach and sometimes it worked. And then the next time the same problem comes up, and the old approach doesn't work, which means you've got to be on top of things, look more carefully for subtle things you might have missed the last time around. This is one of the reasons why ingenuity is such an important part of insight.

If meditation is simply a process of paint-by-the-numbers, putting in blue paint where it says two, and brown paint where it says four, you get something that looks like a picture but it's not really the same sort of thing. There's no inspiration. And how can you hope to learn anything unless you explore?

This is why Ajaan Lee once said that if you see something that seems right, turn it around. Turn it inside out to see where the inside-out version can also be right. In other words, you play with the sense of the breath energy coming up in the body and it seems good, well, turn it around and see what it's like to make it go down. Or if it feels like the breath is something you have to pull into the body or push out of the body, what happens to the meditation, what happens to your state of concentration, when you allow yourself to think that the breath is already there no matter what you do? It's simply a matter of rearranging the furniture, playing with different aspects of breath that are already there in the body. And since you don't pull things in, or push things out, that creates less of a burden on the mind.

You can think of the breath coming in from the back of the body. Ajaan Fuang once talked about thinking of there being a line going down the middle of the body, and the breath comes in and out of that line. Thinking of the breath in that way: What does it do? What problem is it good for?

This is one of the reasons why the instructions Ajaan Lee gives are general principles, but the insight comes in working out the details for yourself: one, seeing a problem and then two, trying to find some way to solve it. All too often, people sit here and they don't see problems at all. They just get a general sense of frustration, but they don't get very specific as to what precisely is the problem.

That's a lot of the problem right there. You're sitting here and your mind isn't settling down: Okay, is it the breath? Is it the attitude you're bringing in from the day? Is there a general sense of discouragement? Well, get rid of that discouragement in any way you can. Think of all the people in the past who had been worse off than you are in their meditation, and yet somehow they were able to rally their strength and come up with a solution.

So, instead of sitting here with a general sense of dissatisfaction or frustration or a general sense of not being able to settle down, try to be specific: What precisely are the problems? Do you have trouble staying with the beginning of the breath, the end of the breath, the middle of the breath? How about the spaces between the breaths? Is it easier to stay with the in-breath, easier to stay with the out-breath? Where do you wander off? If you start asking precise questions like this, then you're going to start getting precise answers. If all you can think of is generalities—how much merit you have, or how good or bad your concentration is in general—you don't get the specific answers you need.

So when things aren't going right in meditation, try to be very specific in figuring out precisely what's wrong. First, what's the problem? Usually once you've been able to figure out the problem, the answer can come a lot more easily. Or at least you get a way of approaching the answer. If the problem is with the breath, you can work with the breath. If the problem's with the mind, you can turn around and work with the mind.

When you come right down to it, all the issues are specific. If you feel it's a problem with lust, it's not just one big lust. There's lust for different things. Just go through the list. If you notice you lust for particular things, particular sights, sounds, smells, tastes, whatever, focus on what specifically seems to be the main obsession of the lust. If you find yourself, say, focusing on a particular part of somebody's body, well, focus on the area around it inside the body. You begin to see that it's not so much lust in general, it's your habit of focusing on certain things and blocking other things out, then bring in other information to

counteract it, bring in the real facts of the case. You see that each instance of lust has its own particular characteristics.

The same with desire in general, for not just lustful desire, any kind of desire: Desires are not monolithic things. You have specific desires for specific things. When you're angry, you're angry about specific things. You may have a general tendency to fly off the handle, but what precisely are the things that make you fly off this time? Why? What satisfaction do you get out of flying off the handle? What regrets do you have afterwards?

When strong emotions come into the mind, they really do seem monolithic, as if the only thing you can think of is to be angry, the only thing you can think of is to desire. But that's a ruse. They've simply pushed all your other desires out of the way. There is a part of the mind that doesn't want to be angry, a part of the mind that doesn't want to lust, yet it gets stunted because it's given only a little corner of the mind in which to hide.

So when one type of desire comes up, ask yourself: What about the desire for the opposite thing, the desire to be free of desire? Is it there in the mind someplace? It says, "Here, I'm over here, I'm over here," but it seems awfully small. Well, try to give it some space. Give it some respect, even though it may seem small and weak, because small things can grow strong. Little fires can grow. Little snakes can kill. Little princes can grow up and be dangerous. Don't underestimate the small things in the mind. Just because it's small now doesn't mean that it always will be. Give it more space.

At least let there be a struggle in the mind. Don't just give in to whatever the dominant desire or dominant anger seems to be at any one particular time. Learn to look at things as particulars. After a while, you begin to see common patterns. But when you take on each specific instance of any of the hindrances—sensual desire, ill will, torpor and lethargy, restlessness and anxiety, or uncertainty—deal with them as specific individual things. When you come out with a little victory over one of them, don't listen to that voice in the mind that says, "Well, it's only one victory, but I'm going to comeback sometime. Don't think you're so smart": Don't let that get to you. Keep piling up little victories in the mind.

What it all comes down to is that each breath is a specific breath. Each way of conceiving the breath is a specific strategy. Each disturbance that comes up in the mind is a specific disturbance. Take them on one by one, and after a while you start getting skillful. You're not dealing with generalities. You're dealing with things as they're actually happening, which is where you can make all the difference.