

# *Experimental Intelligence*

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One of the most important principles in meditating on the breath is learning how to experiment with it. Try different kinds of breathing to see which rhythm, which texture of breathing feels best for the body right now, and which is also best for the mind. Some ways of breathing can put you to sleep, other ways of breathing get you irritated, so you want to check and see what kind of breathing is going to make it easiest for the mind to settle down in a state of mindful alertness and want to stay there. If the body is uncomfortable because of the way you breathe, you're not taking advantage of the fact that the breath *can* make it comfortable.

I know a lot of people who are surprised by this aspect of Ajaan Lee's instructions for breath meditation. They come to meditation with the idea that you're supposed to let things simply happen on their own and not do anything to them—that you just watch the breath however it comes in, however it goes out. But even the Buddha's instructions on breath meditation frequently state that you "train" yourself to do things in a certain way. You train yourself to be aware of the whole body as you breathe in, aware of the whole body as you breathe out. You train yourself so that the breath calms down, giving rise to the next steps, where you can train yourself to breathe in with a sense of ease, with a sense of rapture. And then you can calm those feelings.

There's an element of will in all this, an element of fabrication in which you intentionally cause things to happen. That's important for not only getting the mind to settle down with a sense of ease, but also for developing insight—because insight comes down to a matter of seeing cause and effect.

I think it was Aristotle who defined intelligence as the ability to see connections. When you do X, Y happens. When you do Z, W happens. The ability to see that on your own is a sign of intelligence, and that sort of intelligence can be developed by learning to look for causes and effects. This is how you do it: You change certain things and see where the change has an impact. You change other things and see where *that* has an impact. If changing X causes Y to change every time, you know that X is a condition for Y.

This principle permeates all of the Buddha's teachings. Everything is checked by the results it gives. When the Buddha was teaching his aunt the basic principles of the Dhamma, it came down to this: When you adopt a particular teaching, what effect does it have? Does it give rise to passion? To being fettered?

To accumulating, to self-aggrandizement, to discontent, to entanglement, to laziness, to being burdensome? Then that's a wrong teaching. Does it give rise to the opposite qualities, such as dispassion, modesty, and not being fettered? Okay, that's a right teaching. That's how you know what's Dhamma and what's not. You take all the Dhamma you hear and you test it in terms of cause and effect. You don't take anything for granted just because you've heard that it's so.

Sometimes we hear that the basic Buddhist insight is into the three characteristics—*inconstancy, stress, not-self*—which doesn't seem to involve many connections between cause and effect. But here you have to remember two things. One, the Buddha never talked about "three characteristics." The phrase "three characteristics" doesn't appear in his teachings. That was something added later in the commentaries. He taught these three themes—*inconstancy, stress, not-self*—as perceptions and contemplations, as labels you apply to things, and aspects you look for in your experience of things.

But there's a larger context for looking for these things, or learning to see things in light of them. The larger context is formed by the four noble truths: the fact that there is suffering, that there's a cause for suffering, that suffering can cease, and that there's a path of practice leading to its cessation. These truths in turn relate to a more basic issue: that the whole purpose of the Buddha's teachings is for the sake of finding true happiness. And he brings both the heart and the head together on this project.

The heart's basic desire is for happiness with the least amount of effort, whereas the head is the part that recognizes that there are causes and effects, and that if you want to get anywhere, you have to learn this pattern and work within it. In following the Buddha's teachings, these two sides of your awareness, heart and head, have to learn to work together. The heart has to learn respect for the fact that if you want true happiness, it's going to require some work. You'll have to get the causes right. At the same time, the head has to recognize that true happiness is a worthwhile goal. You don't just think about things and analyze them just for the sake of spinning out ideas and showing you're smart. You want to understand cause and effect so that you can find true happiness. And as the Buddha traces out the causes of suffering, one of the big causes is clinging. So one way of learning how to let go of clinging is to see things in light of those three perceptions of *inconstancy, stress, and not-self*. You don't stop with just seeing things in terms of those perceptions. At the same time, you have to learn the right time and place to apply them: when they actually serve the purpose of leading to a greater happiness.

All the teachings have their time and place. You have to see each teaching in the larger structure of this pursuit of happiness, and try to apply it in an intelligent way. A large part of this means that you have to be heedful. You can't

just assume that anything that comes popping up in your mind, or any idea that you have, is going to lead to true happiness. You can't assume that any teaching you receive from anybody is going to lead to true happiness, or that you can apply it willy-nilly to everything that comes up. You have to test things to learn when and how they work.

So a central part of the Buddha's teaching consists of instructions in the best way to test things. You start out by getting the mind to be still. Get it into strong states of concentration where everything is very, very still, so that you can observe, when a thought comes into the mind, what it does to the mind; or when you do an action, what it does to the mind. If things aren't really still, you can't see the impact of a thought, the impact of an action very clearly. It's like trying to listen to a very soft piece of music on the stereo at the same time that you've got a lawnmower outside, or trucks driving up and down the road. The background noise is so loud that it obscures the subtleties you're trying to hear. The same way with the mind: Unless you can get the mind really, really still, you can't really watch the effects of your actions, the effects of your words, the effects of your thoughts. Many actions may seem perfectly harmless in an ordinary state of mind, but when the mind gets really, really still, you begin to see that they actually have an adverse impact on the mind.

So this is why we work at bringing the mind to concentration. This is why the Buddha said that concentration should be developed. He didn't say, "States of concentration come and go. You just watch their coming and going and say, 'Ah, yes, this is inconstant, stressful, not-self.'" That's not the duty that the four noble truths assign to concentration. The duty they assign is that when you encounter states of mindfulness, you try to develop them. When you encounter states of concentration, you try to develop them. Make them stronger, because you're going to need them as tools. Whatever serves as a tool on the path, you want to take care of it. You don't just let it go. The same with the breath: You work with it, you take care of it, because it's going to help you get the mind to settle down. It's going to help give you a good solid foundation.

I know someone who went to study in Thailand after she'd been doing the Ajaan Lee method. She met a teacher who said: "What is this, improving the breath? You're supposed to let it go and be on its own. After all, it's just a *sankhara*, just a fabrication. Why try to improve it?" She reported to me what he had said. My response was: "Go back and ask him, 'Why bathe your body? After all, it's just a *sankhara*, just let it go.'" Of course you can't do that. You've got to look after the body because you're using it as a tool. The same with the breath: You look after the breath, tend to it, because it helps the mind to settle down with a sense of ease and solidity that you're going to need for deeper insights. At the same time, as you're working with the breath, you get insight into cause and

effect. Because even when the mind settles down and you see things, you've got to test them.

Sometimes you hear the teaching that once the mind settles down, you get in touch with your Buddha nature or your Inner Stillness, and you can trust whatever your Buddha nature or Inner Stillness tells you. The Buddha never taught that way. Even stream enterers, he said, have got to be heedful. You can't trust everything that comes out of the mind. He even said that arahants had to be heedful about their actions. Even totally enlightened beings can't totally assume that everything they see or hear is actually the way it is. They have to test it.

Go look in the Vinaya. A couple of the rules were actually formulated because some arahants made some mistakes. For instance, there's the rule against monks eating stored-up food. Ven. Belatthasisa, who was an arahant, figured, "Well, I can just go for alms once a week, take the leftover rice, and dry it. That's a nice frugal way of living, and I don't have to go out for alms every day. Just eat the leftover rice from the days before." The Buddha found out about it and took him to task. He said, "This is not a wise course of action." The story doesn't explain what the Buddha's reasoning was, but if you look at the history of Buddhism, you see that down the line, in later centuries, when monks stopped going for alms, they created a rift in the Buddhist community at large. The monks lived on their own, they had their own kitchens, with monastery attendants to fix their food. Lay people basically stopped caring about the monks. And as a result, when the Muslims came into India and destroyed the monasteries, the lay people didn't really care. The connection had been severed. The Buddha saw that far ahead. So even fully awakened arahants can't always assume that what they think is true. They've got to test it and check it, just like everybody else. So when insights arise in your meditation, or when you gain an intuitive feel for something, the question is not where the insight comes from, but what happens when you apply it. You view it as a hypothesis in an experiment.

You're developing an experimental intelligence here. You take the passages you read in the texts and you experiment with them. You take the insights you receive from meditation and you experiment with them. There's a passage in the very first sutta in the Digha Nikaya, listing all the different kinds of wrong views that people can develop, and not every wrong view comes from people simply thinking things out without having practiced meditation. A lot of wrong views come from people who meditate and gain some insights or intuitive knowledge, but the knowledge isn't as complete as they thought it was. So they jump to the wrong conclusions.

What this means is that whether the source of your insight is something you've learned from the texts, something you've thought out on your own, an

intuitive feeling you have, or something that comes up in your meditation, you always have to test it to see: “If I adopt this, where does it go? What does it connect with? What are the connections here in terms of cause and effect?” That’s how you test to see, in terms of the insights you gain, which ones are fool’s gold and which ones are genuine gold. You put them to use and then see what happens. And you always adopt the heedful attitude that says, “I’m testing things here. I won’t draw any firm conclusions until I’ve seen what actually works in freeing the mind.” As the Buddha says, just because you like a particular truth or it seems to fit in with your worldview, that’s no guarantee that it’s actually true.

We’ve all read the Kalama Sutta, where the Buddha says not to take religious texts as being necessarily true. That’s the part everybody seems to remember. The other part though, is that he also says not to take what you like as necessarily being true. Don’t take what seems to fit into your worldview as true; don’t take what seems to work out logically as necessarily being true. You’ve got to test things. When you adopt this or that idea, this or that practice, what happens? Check these things out not only against your own experience, but also against the experience of wise people. In this way, you’re much more likely to find truths that really, really are true, because they’ve stood up to the test.

Of course this means we have to be very careful in how we conduct our tests, which again is why we work at developing concentration, developing mindfulness, all the mental attributes of patience, endurance, alertness, honesty, and discernment. They put us in a position where we can test things and evaluate the results reliably, so that we’re not overcome by bias and we can overcome the limitations of the worldviews and ideas we bring to the practice.

After all, the purpose of the practice is to see things we’ve never seen before, to attain things we’ve never attained before. That means you have to learn how to overcome the limitations of your assumptions. And this is how you do it: You adopt this experimental way of developing intelligence, so that your heart’s desire— a true happiness—will get fulfilled, even if it’s not quite in the way you might have wanted it. After all, this does require work. But it’s a path of work and of effort that leads ultimately to a happiness that, once you’ve attained it, doesn’t require any effort to maintain. Only through gaining intelligence in terms of cause and effect can you find the happiness that ultimately lies beyond cause and effect.

So we work with the nitty-gritty of just learning to observe what’s going on in the mind, testing it, learning to put away whatever assumptions don’t pass the test—because only through working through the details like this do we ultimately break through to something much larger and more lasting.