

A Genius about Your own Mind

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A lot of the work in the meditation lies in trying to stay in the present moment. Because the mind finds it so easy to slip off to the past and the future, it's quite an accomplishment to stay right here continually with the breath coming in and going out. So whatever skills can get you here, either by taking an interest in the mind in the present or by taking an interest in the breath in the present, you want to develop them. Sometimes, though, when people can settle down in the present moment, they're in a great hurry to move on, saying, "What's the next step?" Well, the next step is going to be right here. So you want to learn how to settle in, to stay here steadily, firmly. And, in some cases, so much effort goes into settling in here that people then get discouraged to learn that there's more to be done.

Being in the present is not an end in and of itself. There's more work to do. We're here because this is where the work can be done—where it has to be done. As the Buddha said, one of the keys to his gaining awakening was that he did not rest content with the skillful qualities he had developed. This is the quality that really makes or breaks a meditator. Some people get to the present moment and they're just happy to be there. They say, "Well, the Buddha teaches contentment. So I'll just be content with whatever comes up. I'll just watch things arise and pass away and not get involved. And that's going to be enough." But that wasn't the Buddha's attitude. He said, with regard to what's arising and passing away: Is there any potential in there for stress and suffering?

They say that the difference between a genius and someone who's simply intelligent is that an intelligent person can solve a problem that people have seen for a long time. But a genius is someone who sees and solves a problem that nobody else saw before. That's the kind of person the Buddha was. He studied with teachers who were able to get their minds to very subtle levels of concentration: the dimensions of nothingness and neither perception nor non-perception. Yet he saw that there was still danger those attainments. There was still a problem there. They didn't meet with his standards of totally deathless happiness. And so he moved on. And, through trial and error, he finally found something that was a lot better. We remember his teachers simply because they were associated with him. If they hadn't been associated with the Buddha, their names would have been forgotten a long time ago. But the Buddha was special. He

saw dangers where everybody else saw safety. And he was able to get beyond those dangers and show other people how they could get beyond them, too.

So this is something we have to emulate in our own practice: to see where there are dangers that we hadn't noticed before and to find some way around them.

This is one of the reasons why the forest tradition, when it teaches meditation, puts so much emphasis on the quality of ingenuity. This is not the kind of meditation technique where you're told to do just one thing over and over and over again and don't think about it and don't ask questions about it aside from questions about how to keep doing it more and more and more consistently. You're actually encouraged to explore.

With Ajaan Lee's instructions about the breath, he gives you a few beginning recommendations. But then, in his Dhamma talks, you see how he himself played with his recommendations. You realize there's a lot more going on in here than just what's just in the short guide. Or Ajaan Maha Boowa's questions about pain: You're dealing with pain in the body; pain in the mind. You start asking questions about it. You start asking questions you didn't ask before. After all, we're here to see something we never saw before, which is going to require doing things we've never done before and asking questions we never asked before. The more you can be ingenious in coming up with new questions, the more ingenious you'll also be in seeing dangers where you didn't expect them.

Very early on in his quest, the Buddha was approached by King Bimbisara. This was well before the Buddha had become the Buddha. King Bimbisara saw this mendicant who didn't look like an ordinary mendicant. He looked like a noble warrior, and in fact he was. So the king offered him a position in his army. The Buddha responded, "That's not what I have gone forth for. I'm not going forth for sensual pleasures, because I see the dangers in sensuality." Here, "sensuality" means not just your indulgence in sensual pleasures, but also the mind's fascination with thinking sensual thoughts, making sensual plans. And the Buddha saw it's right there that there's a danger. Most people don't see that.

There was a writer a while back who said, "Desire is okay as long as you're not attached to the object." But as the Buddha noticed, we're really not attached as much to the object as we are to the act of desiring itself. We can sit and fantasize for hours about a sensual pleasure of one kind or another, even though the pleasure itself, when you actually encounter it, doesn't take that much time—or it doesn't provide you with that much time. It can leave you pretty quickly. But the mind can wear itself out with that kind of thinking and develop a weakness. And yet it has this need to keep going for those sensual hits again and again. The more

you're dependent on a particular kind of happiness, a particular kind of way that things are arranged outside, the weaker you are. There's a danger there.

But then the Buddha saw that there are further dangers as you go up the path. Like contentment itself: When you're content with whatever food you get, whatever clothing you get, whatever shelter you get, he says that there are dangers even in that contentment, because there can be an element of pride that you're content while other people are not. It's like that old Onion article about that monk who was proclaimed in the spiritual Olympics as being the most serene. The accompanying picture shows him raising his hand in victory, with pride written all over his face. Well, that pride totally undoes whatever goodness there was in the serenity to begin with. So even in something as good as contentment, the Buddha says, there are dangers. Watch out. He saw dangers where people didn't see them.

Then he goes further. One of the ways he has of expressing the path is in the five strengths and the five faculties: conviction, persistence, mindfulness, concentration, and discernment. These are all things we have to develop and in many cases they require a lot of work. Having conviction in the Buddha's awakening is pretty demanding because it sets forth the possibility that human beings can find a deathless happiness. There are a lot of people, even people nowadays teaching the Dhamma, who shy away from that.

Conviction in his awakening also means that there are things that human beings can know about karma, about rebirth, about the path to a deathless happiness and what it involves. And I've encountered Dhamma teachers who'd rather say, "Well, the Buddha just had opinions about these things. And maybe he wasn't all that sure about them himself." That's simply trying to drag the Buddha down to their level so that they're not challenged by his life. Genuine conviction makes demands on you.

The same with persistence: the effort of the practice requires that you put in a lot of time and a lot of energy, to learn how to outwit the mind when it's trying to be lazy and to learn how to motivate yourself so that you really are willing and happy to put forth the effort. The same with mindfulness, concentration, discernment: These things make demands. They require work. But in order to develop them, there's going to be an element of conceit—the conceit simply that "This is something I can do." It's necessary. That confidence in yourself is necessary. But you have to watch out for that. It's going to have its drawbacks here and there. You identify yourself, you define yourself, in certain ways for the purpose of the path—which is a lot better than defining yourself in ways that go against the path—but eventually, even that provisional sense of self, or those

provisional selves, are going to have to be let go, or else they'll turn around and bite you.

There's an interesting passage where the Buddha talks about the different ways in which he was able to measure his awakening to see that it was genuine awakening. A lot of them seem pretty obvious. With feelings or cravings, he was able to see how they arose, how they passed away, what their allure was, what their drawbacks were, and then how you escape from them through dispassion. That makes a lot of sense because these things are obviously ways of trapping the mind. What's subtler is that he applied the same analysis to the five strengths: conviction, persistence, mindfulness, concentration, discernment. He saw how they arose and passed away, what their allure was, what their drawbacks were, and the escape from them. He had to develop dispassion even for them.

In other words, he saw a problem where nobody else saw problems—and he was able to find a solution. That's why he was the Buddha.

So think about that as you practice. You may be perfectly fine in the present moment, or think you're fine, but you have to ask yourself, "Is there still a drawback to this, the sense of peace or security I'm feeling right now?" Look for it, because it's there. As long as it's not the deathless, there's going to be a drawback, even to the factors of the path, to say nothing of things that are off the path.

So you can't be complacent. That's what a lot of contentment in the practice turns into if you're not careful: complacency—about your ability to be in the present, about what little insights you get. You have to be constantly on the lookout for the dangers that these things contain. When you get an insight, look at what the mind does immediately after the insight to see how it responds, or how it reacts, or what new sense of self develops around it. When you're convinced of the truth of an insight, as Ajaan Lee says, "Just as everything has a shadow, every truth has a false side to it." After all, truths are simply representations of something else.

There's only one truth that's not a representation and that's the truth of the deathless. Wherever there's a representation, it's like a mirage. It's not quite the real thing. So even when you think you've seen something really true, look for its false side. What this means is that you have to be very demanding. You have to have high standards. Set the same high standards for yourself that the Buddha set for himself: that you're not going to rest content with whatever level of skill you've got. Look for its drawbacks. And then try to figure out a way around them.

This means that you've got to learn how to see problems in things you never saw as problematic before. It's a type of genius. And here's your opportunity. You can be a genius concerning your own mind. Of course, a lot of being a genius also

means you've seen your own stupidity, which is why people who've gained awakening have no pride around it. So no matter how good your practice gets, remember it can still have its dangers. There are still problems there. If you just get complacent and say, "Well, I'm going to be happy right here, content right here," you've shut the door on yourself, closed the door on any further progress. Is that what you want to do? Or would you rather keep the door open to see how far you can actually go?