

No One Size Fits All

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Ajaan Fuang once told me he heard Ajaan Mun say that we human beings are all the same, but we're different, but when you come down to it, we're all the same. And one of the meanings of that is that we all have the same basic problems, but they don't all respond to the same approach.

You see this in the forest tradition itself as a whole. There's no single forest tradition technique for meditation. When people came to see Ajaan Mun, he would assign different techniques to them. Ajaan Lee, who probably wrote out the most detailed of any of the techniques in the forest tradition, left at least two different ways of working with the breath, and he would talk about other topics as well: recollection of the Buddha, contemplation of the body, the brahmaviharas, contemplation of death. The point being that we all have to find the way that'll work for us, and in some cases, there's not just one way that'll work.

In Ajaan Lee's explanation, you want to have one technique that's your home base, and he recommended the breath because it's the safest of all the techniques. But then you also need other techniques that function as the places where you go foraging. In other words, you have to look for a solution, say, to the problem of lust or the problem of anger, the problem of sleepiness. Sometimes the breath is not the topic for that particular problem, so you need to have a wide range of other choices.

We see this in the Canon as well. When the Buddha taught breath meditation to his son Rahula, he didn't teach just breath meditation. He taught contemplation of not-self, contemplation of inconstancy. This was even before the breath. He taught contemplation of the elements, making the mind like the elements as a way of developing patience; contemplation of the body; the brahmaviharas. In other words, he wanted Rahula to have a full set of tools for all the ten recollections that the Buddha taught—for all kinds of topics. And it's up to us to figure out which particular themes are going to work for us and which ones will work at different times. There's no one-size-fits-all in the Buddhist teachings.

More recently, especially in the nineteenth century when Asia was amazed by the West's superiority—in terms of firepower, at least—they attributed it to the fact that the West was able to pare manufacturing down to the essentials. So they did the same thing to their own traditions. They did a reductionist take on the Buddhist teachings, for example, trying to boil everything down to one technique

or two. But that ignores the fact that people all have that aspect where they are different. When a problem comes up, you have to find out which way is going to work for you. You have to learn how to read yourself—and that’s is a large part of discernment right there.

If all you had to do were to know just one technique and apply it relentlessly, it wouldn’t take much discernment. Any fool can do that. What’s required in this essential part of the middle way is that you figure out what’s just right for you right now, what’s appropriate for you right now—just as in the middle way, sometimes intense effort is right and sometimes very gentle effort is right, depending on what’s needed. In seeing that, in ferreting out that point of “just right,” you develop your discernment. So sometimes you have to work really hard, sometimes you have to be very gentle, but in learning how to read yourself, that’s how the discernment comes. You become more and more sensitive to what the mind is doing, what the results are, and what you need to do in response. That’s the basis of insight. That’s the basis of discernment.

So as you’re trying to get the mind into concentration, the big questions are: “How do you get the mind to settle down? How do you get it to enjoy where it is, get some refreshment out of it?” And then there are the questions of insight. Here again, the Buddha didn’t teach one single technique. He just set up some questions: “How should fabrications be regarded? How should they be investigated? How should they be seen with insight?” Those are the questions you ask, and it’s in answering those, in figuring out how to answer them, that your discernment develops. That, as the Buddha said, is one of the signs of someone with real discernment: that he or she knows how to answer a question.

It’s not that we’re trying to clone awakening. All the tools the Buddha gave for discernment are tools for questions. Even the teachings on inconstancy, stress, not-self—those are questions to ask. Something comes up in the meditation that you find yourself gravitating to, getting stuck on, so you ask yourself, “Is this constant or not?” If it’s not, if you can see any inconstancy in it, then that’s a sign that this is not your goal. But then the next question is, “Is this a tool along the way?” And that requires even more discernment.

So take your basic techniques, make them your home base, and then learn how to read the mind to see where you are and what type you are. As the Buddha said, there are some who start out with insight and go into tranquility, and others who start out with tranquility and go into insight, and then there are those who have to develop the two together. In his case, it seems that he developed the two together.

The meditation technique that he taught most was breath meditation. He taught it both as a concentration technique and as a discernment technique, because after all, with the breath you're trying to get things calm, but before you get things calm, the Buddha teaches how to see things in terms of fabrication. The breath is bodily fabrication. In other words, it creates your sense of the body right now. And there's mental fabrication: perceptions and feelings. In both cases, the Buddha says, once you see that process of fabrication, you learn how to calm it. So in that way, you're doing both insight and tranquility at the same time.

And then there's verbal fabrication in the instructions themselves. You're telling yourself, training yourself to breathe in and out sensitive to the whole body, breathe in and out sensitive to whatever potential there is for rapture or pleasure, trying to develop it as much as you can. Those are things you tell yourself to do. That's verbal fabrication.

Once there's a sense of ease and well-being, you try to spread it around. And these instructions actually raise some questions: How do you breathe in a way that gives rise to rapture? How do you breathe in a way that gives rise to pleasure? How do you spread it around? Ajaan Lee gives some helpful tips by having you work with the breath energies in the body. How do you breathe in a way that you have a sense that the whole body is breathing and it's all breathing together?

In learning how to do that, you begin to notice that there are times when you push things too much, and other times when you're pushing them not enough. Times when you have to be allowing, and a few times when you have to force things. And the question is: Which? When? That's something you've got to learn how to read: how to develop your sensitivity to what you're doing and the results that you're getting, and to figure out what's right for you right now.

So in this way, we take advantage of the fact that we are different, and not only different from one another. Each mind goes through different stages. It'll have its different defilements that'll require different approaches, so it has to learn how to read what's going on and promote some sensitivity. There can be no discernment without this sensitivity to what the mind needs. Think of the image of the cook, the cook who learns how to read his master. The foolish cook doesn't bother, just keeps churning out food, which the master may like or may not like, but he finally decides he's sick and tired of this cook because the cook isn't paying any attention. It's the cook who pays attention to what the master seems to like and who will provide more of that: That's the cook who gets rewarded.

So try to be sensitive to what's needed right now, and have a range of tools that you can pick up to deal with whatever contingency comes along. That's how the mind both settles down and gains insight. The concentration itself becomes more

sensitive. Your insights become more sensitive. And that sensitivity is what will take you where you want to go.