

Creativity & Play

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An important part of learning how to meditate lies in learning how to play with your meditation. For example, when you're focusing on your breath, you want to learn how to play with your breath.

To understand why, look at what you do when you're playing. You're trying out new things, you're enjoying the fact that the mind can create something and can think of new ways of doing things. Look also at the different approaches to playing. Some games are played without rules, but a lot of games have rules. In fact, the more rules, the more fun the game is, the more of a challenge. When you're playing with the breath there are certain rules. The satisfaction comes in learning how to master the rules, play within the rules, and yet still play well. When you win at this game, you're winning out over your defilements. You're winning out over greed, anger and delusion. But in the meantime the important thing about playing is that what you're doing isn't drudgery. It's fun.

Researchers have found that people whose work doesn't challenge them, doesn't inspire them, are the ones most likely to get Alzheimer's, because the brain isn't engaged. Playing requires intelligence. It develops a certain kind of intelligence, precisely the kind of intelligence that we want to develop in the practice. It's not the intelligence that simply memorizes things and, as one of my professors used to say, vomits them back out on an exam. It's the intelligence that sees problems and can work with them. It sees problems that other people didn't see, and can also see connections that other people didn't see—how a lesson you learned in this part of the practice can be applied to that part of the practice—and it can test to see if the connection has any practical value.

That's the kind of intelligence, the kind of playing we're talking about. After all, what is the Dhamma? It's a set of strategies—strategies for gaining happiness given the fact that there are certain laws governing the way action gives results. The laws are a little complex, like the laws governing turbulence in water. They're complex but not mechanical. That's what makes them challenging, like taking a boat through rapids. And the purpose of the practice is what makes you want to rise to the challenge. After all, it *is* your happiness at stake here.

When you come to the practice, you already have certain strategies for becoming happy. Our whole sense of self is just that: a strategy. You learn to identify which things are worth looking after, to see that the wellbeing of certain things is more productive of happiness than the wellbeing of other things. Having a sense of self also teaches you to deny yourself certain things now so that you get better results in the future. It inspires you to practice. It inspires you

to get skillful. That's a positive side of the sense of self. It also reminds you that you're responsible for your happiness, that you can't sit around and simply expect it to come to you. That's another positive side to the sense of self. And in the practice we're encouraged to think in that way. This is why we chant the passage on being subject to aging, illness, death, and separation, for that's the predicament in which we find ourselves. If you didn't have a sense of self, you wouldn't see it as a problem; if you have an immature sense of self, you wouldn't have any idea of how to go about solving the problem.

So your sense of self is an important strategy, but remember: It's just that, a strategy. If you dig around to find anything of lasting value that's worth identifying as, "Yes, this is my self" – if you look at it carefully it starts dissolving away. You can use that sense of self as a strategy when it's useful, but after a certain point you have to start taking that strategy apart because there's a more subtle strategy, the not-self strategy, that leads to a more subtle happiness. But in both cases, if you can learn to play with these concepts to see exactly how far they're useful and where they're no longer useful, that's when the practice really seeps into you, because the things you play with are really close to your heart.

What is your heart? On the one hand, it's the ability to fabricate, and on the other hand it's the ability to experience the pleasure or lack of pleasure that comes from the fabrication. And right there is where you're going to look for Awakening. Right there is where you're going to look for the Deathless: right in this ability to fabricate and in your sensitivity to how much your fabrication is leading to happiness. The path is something you fabricate, so learn how to play well with the path, within the strictures, the rules, formed by the laws of causality. As with any game, you've got to stay within the rules, but within the rules you find that there's a lot of latitude. What kind of meditation object works best for you? That's something you've got to find out by playing with the different objects of meditation and learning to see which object you enjoy playing with most – the one you keep coming back to, coming back to, because it sparks your imagination.

Ajaan Fuang once told the story of Ajaan Kongmaa complaining to Ajaan Lee, "How can you meditate on the breath? It's just in and out, in and out. That's all there is to it." And Ajaan Lee said to him "If that's all you see in it, then that's all you'll get from it." Ajaan Lee saw a lot of other things there. If you read his Dhamma talks, you'll see that he continued exploring the breath all the way up to the end of his life. He was always finding new ways of looking at the breath, new ways of playing with the breath energy, new strategies of conceiving the breath energy, to help the mind settle down quickly and comfortably and have it stay there for long periods of time.

To play this game, you have to see the wandering mind, the curious mind that wanders around getting itself in trouble, as a problem, but you've also got to see the curiosity as a potential for helping you with the path. You can use it to explore the breath, to work with the breath in different ways to get the mind to

settle down, to get it engrossed in the present moment. And what's more engrossing than playing? With some things, you can play with them for a while and you lose interest, for you've taken them as far as they can provide entertainment. But with the breath you can keep exploring here, exploring there, and then as you get more intimate with the breath you finally get more intimate with the processes of the mind. The thinking – the directed thought and evaluation: Play with those, see how subtle they can get, see what level of wellbeing they can give, what level of gratification they can give in the present moment.

To begin with, try different ways of adjusting the breath. Sometimes all you need to do is *think* and the breath will change. Think, "Comfortable breath." Think, "Full breath." You don't have to do anything else – just think that thought, maintain that thought, and see what happens to the process of breathing in the body.

Or, if you want, you can play with your focus. Instead of focusing on just one spot, try to focus on two spots at once. I personally always find that riveting. One spot can be in the middle of the head, the other spot can be down in the body – say, at the base of the spine – and think of a line connecting the two. Try to be aware of both spots, all at once, all the time. When you can maintain that double focus, the mind doesn't have any other hands to latch onto things. One hand is holding on to one spot, the other hand is holding on to the other: Your hands are full.

So there's a lot to play with, a lot to work with here in the present moment. Ajaan Fuang would often say, "Try this approach. If it doesn't work, try something else," in the same way a coach would say, "Well, if that way doesn't work, try this," to encourage you to experiment, to judge the results, to start thinking on your own. If you try one approach and it doesn't work, there may be other approaches you can think of that will work. It's important that you engage the inventive side of your mind as you meditate, learning how to use it so that it's not just wandering off in abstract imagination, but so that it's actually applied to what's going on right here, right now. Put it into play as part of your practice.

What we're doing is learning where true happiness comes from. True happiness is not going to be dull, so keep your interest up, keep your expectations up. And this requires a sense of play. There are certain challenges that you're bound to run up against, and the element of play provides the side of you that's up for the challenge: "How about this? How do you get around this problem? How do you get around that problem?" Play wouldn't be fun if there weren't rules you run up against, certain facts of life you run up against, and you find them challenging.

So you've got this mind that's creating suffering for itself. It's busy concocting things all day long. See that as a challenge. How can you take that process of concoction, the way the mind randomly fabricates this, that, and the other thing, and turn it to better uses, so that it can concoct the path that leads to true

happiness? That's the challenge we've got here. We use the breath – the in-and-out breath, the breath in the nerves, the breath in the blood vessels, the breath energy that goes up as we breathe in, the energy that goes down as we breathe in, the energy that's always coming up the spine – as tools in responding to that challenge. We use the things we learn about the mind as we stay with the breath, as ways of responding to that challenge. We get directions from the books, we get directions from teachers, but a lot of the insight that's actually going to liberate us comes from experimenting with this approach, playing with this idea, experimenting with that strategy on our own, seeing what works, what doesn't work. If it's not working, what can you do to adjust it so it does?

The curious, inquisitive side of your mind is what's going to lead to discernment. The people who aren't inquisitive are the ones who get stuck in concentration and don't want to move. Or they blindly want to follow a method where everything is spelled out for them, but all they get is pre-packaged meditation product – like the packaged foods that contain so little actual food that they have to be labeled as "food product." But if you're naturally inquisitive, if you can make a game out of learning how to bring the mind to settle down, then once the mind is settled down it'll naturally want to understand this, understand that, understand the processes of what you're doing. That's insight.

So these are qualities you want to bring to your meditation: the ability to play, to respond to challenges, to be inquisitive, to find something here in the present moment that engages your imagination. And then you apply your imagination to a genuine problem: the fact that you're causing yourself suffering right here and now. This means, one, being able to imagine yourself not causing suffering and, two, imagining approaches that might get you to that goal. Experimenting with different ways of breathing, different ways of conceiving the breathing, different ways of focusing the mind, different ways of asking questions: There's a lot to play with here. And as long as you're fully engaged, you're bound to make discoveries.

This is called the quality of *citta*, or intentness: the intentness that comes when you're really absorbed in something, when you're really engrossed in something, when you find that what you're doing gives you satisfaction, the satisfaction of learning how to master a problem. You've got this very creative mind, so how can you use it so that it doesn't create problems? How can you use it to find those areas of experience where there's no creating going on? Not out of dullness. I mean even dull people create things all the time – this is what the mind does, it fabricates things – but they don't get engaged in trying to do it well. What we're looking for instead is to see if there's a dimension where there's no creation and yet there is total happiness. How do you find that? To some extent you follow instructions, but you've also got to have the attitude of "Give this a try, give that a try." If you don't learn how to try things you've never tried before, never imagined before, you're never going to find anything new that you haven't experienced before. That's why the element of play is so important.