

Licking Yourself Clean

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The Buddha once said that one of the prerequisites for concentration is a sense of comfort, ease, and wellbeing— both physical and mental. One of the reasons we recite those chants on goodwill, compassion, appreciation, and equanimity is to create a sense of wellbeing in the mind. Thoughts of goodwill are good thoughts to think. They feel good. They put the mind at ease. You don't have to struggle with anybody. You don't have to settle any old scores. It feels good to be thinking good thoughts. It helps put you in the right mood to meditate.

Physically, you work first with your posture. You want to sit straight. You don't want to lean over or sit hunched over. Keep your back straight— comfortably straight. Then you work with the breath. Does the breath feel good? Notice where exactly you feel the breath— which parts of the body have sensations that let you know that now the breath is coming in, now the breath is going out. How do those sensations feel? Are they tight, restricted? If they are, think of their loosening up a little bit. Or do they get tight at a particular spot in the breath cycle? You may want to shorten the breath or lengthen it.

Approach this as you would any skill. You learn from your mistakes. One of the first things you learn as you work with the breath is that you're clumsy. You tend to put too much pressure on it. You approach it with an attitude that's too controlling or too tight. But that doesn't mean you should stop working with the breath. It's like the first time you sit down to play the piano. You sit down, and realize you can't play Beethoven. There are three ways of reacting to that. One is to get up and never touch the piano again. Another is to keep playing 4'33" — the John Cage piece where you just sit at the piano and don't do anything at all. And the other is to keep practicing, starting with simple pieces. Learn to listen to your playing, see what you can improve, and gradually get better and better until you *can* play Beethoven. This is how piano playing becomes a skill. This is how any skill gets developed. You explore that boundary line between what you can control and what you can't.

The way to explore it is by poking here, adjusting there, knowing that you probably will make some mistakes but not getting too worried about it because you learn from your mistakes. Over time you get more and more sensitive to exactly how much control is too much, how much is too little, and you develop a wide range of techniques. When there's pain in the body, what's the best way to breathe? When you're tired, what's the best way to breathe? When you're tense, what's the best way to breathe? These are things you can explore.

The whole point of this is that in the course of doing these things, you develop your own sensitivity as to what works and what doesn't. Your standards for what works and what doesn't get more refined. This is how discernment gets developed in the practice. It's not a matter of reading a few books, getting a few ideas, and then cloning your mind to those ideas so that you see things as they're described in the books. That's not discernment. It's just adding one more layer of perceptions on top of the layers you already have. Discernment comes from your ability to see the mind in action and to be sensitive as to when the mind's actions are giving good results and when they aren't. You have to be your own judge. In other words, instead of throwing all the responsibility onto the texts or onto the teachers, you take on the job of learning to be a good judge of your actions.

Ajaan Fuang once said that meditators tend to be like little puppies. They go out and defecate and then come running to their mothers to have their mothers lick them off. They haven't learned how to lick themselves off yet. So as a meditator you need to learn how to lick yourself off. If things don't go well, learn how to pick yourself up, dust yourself off, and then figure out what went wrong. Take responsibility for your meditation. Take responsibility for your insights. This is what the Buddha did. This is what every meditator has to do.

If you go to a teacher, saying you've had a certain experience, and the teacher identifies it as a level of jhana or a level of insight, can you be sure? Do you really want to hand those judgments over to somebody else? Or do you want to learn how to judge things on your own, so that you can trust yourself? If you let the other people do the judging, there's always going to be an element of doubt: Do they know what they're saying? At the same time, you're absolving yourself of any responsibility. Discernment becomes *their* duty and not yours. That's not a good attitude for a meditator to take. You've got to learn to look, to try a few things.

For instance, what is it like just to let the breath come in and out on its own? What is it going to do? Figure out how to watch it. Then figure out how to nudge it, what to think in order to make it more comfortable. Then figure out how to judge the results. This is how discernment is developed, how meditation becomes a skill. As it becomes more and more of a skill, you become more sensitive to even the slightest bit of discomfort both in the body and in the mind. That's how you see the four noble truths. You see stress, you see how it's caused, you connect it to your own actions. You see what you do or don't do that lets the stress be shed away.

So think of the meditation as an experiment, something you try. You're trying to prove a hypothesis: that you can put an end to suffering. Now, scientists like to see their hypothesis proved, but good scientists are willing to admit when it isn't, when the experiment actually proves something else. You chalk it up to experience and you try again.

The instructions for breath meditation involve discernment, and they also involve training yourself. To train in any skill you need desire – the desire to

actually do the practice – and you have to be open and aboveboard about that. Don't try to deny the fact that there's desire. Just learn how to use it skillfully.

Then there has to be persistence. You stick with the practice. Try it again and again and again. But persistence is not just a matter of the hours you put in. You also have to be intent, to pay very careful attention to what you're doing, what the results are. Finally, you need to use your intelligence, which means using ingenuity and being discerning in what works, what doesn't, and how you might try to improve on both. These four qualities are called the bases for success. They're essential to any skill.

So approach the meditation as a skill. Remember how you learned skills in the past. If it was music or art, a sport, carpentry, whatever: How did you go about mastering that skill? A lot of times you made mistakes. You noticed that they were mistakes but you didn't give up. You went back and tried it over again, trying to observe what you did wrong, what you did right, what worked and what didn't. Over time, your hands – which originally seemed to be all thumbs – gradually became human hands: a carpenter's hands, a violinist's hands. And your mind became a craftsman's mind. You reached a point where you didn't have to go running to somebody else to pass judgment on whether you did it right or not. You began to know yourself whether it was right or not. That's when you really mastered the skill.

The same principle applies to the breath. We spend so much of our lives being desensitized to the breath energy in the body – how we actually feel the body from within. We've been so intent on learning other things outside that, to make room for them, we've blocked out this part of our awareness. Now's the time to back up and get more sensitive to this area of your awareness again, to see how it feels, to see how your perceptions of what the breath does are going to affect how the breath actually flows through the body. Experiment to see how you can work both with the breath and with the perceptions of the breath to make it more comfortable, so that you've got that prerequisite for the mind to settle down and get concentrated: a sense of ease, a sense of wellbeing. The body sitting here seems to have a nice flow of energy throughout. It's not blocked. The blood seems to be flowing through all parts of the body. Your focus isn't interfering with it. You feel good just sitting here. The amount of pressure you put on the present moment is just right: not too light, not too heavy. That's something that comes with practice.

So, pay careful attention to what you're doing, because that's how you learn. That's how the meditation becomes your own.