

A Genius about Your Own Mind

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A lot of the work in the meditation lies in just 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 that you can stay right here continually, sensitive to 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 those skills. Sometimes people can settle down in the present moment and then 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 be here steadily, firmly, so that you can watch steadily what's going on.

In some cases, so much effort goes into settling in here that people then get discouraged to learn that there's more, but being in the present is not an end in and of itself. There's more work to be done. 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 didn't rest content with skillful qualities that he had developed. This is the attitude that really makes or breaks a meditator. Some people get to the present moment and they're just happy to be there for a while. 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 okay." But that wasn't the Buddha's attitude. He said about 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 a problem that nobody else saw and can solve the problem as well. 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: nothingness, or neither perception nor non-perception. Yet he saw that there was still danger in those attainments. There was still a problem there. It didn't meet with his standards of totally deathless happiness. 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 those dangers, 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. Theirs 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 experiment and 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 pains in the body, pains in the mind. You start asking questions about them. 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're able to be ingenious in coming up with new questions, the more you'll also be able to be ingenious in seeing there are dangers where you didn't expect them.

Very early on in his quest—when he was still a bodhisatta, a being intent on awakening—the Buddha was approached by King Bimbisara. King Bimbisara saw this young mendicant who didn't look like an ordinary mendicant. He looked like a noble warrior. And it turned out he was. So the king offered him a position in his army. And the Buddha-to-be responded, "That's not what I have gone forth for. I'm not going forth for sensual pleasures, because I see there are dangers in sensuality." There "sensuality" means not just your indulgence in sensual pleasures, but also the mind's fascination with just thinking about sensual thoughts, making sensual plans. And the Buddha saw it's right there in that fascination that there's a danger. Most people don't see that.

There was a Buddhist 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 we actually encounter it, doesn't take that much time, or it doesn't *provide* us with that much time before it moves on and changes into something else. The mind can wear itself out with that kind of sensual thinking and develop a weakness. It creates in itself a need to keep going for those sensual hits again and again. And the more we're dependent on a particular kind of happiness, a particular kind of way that things are arranged outside, the weaker we are. And there's a danger there.

But then the Buddha saw that there are still further dangers as you go up the path. For example, contentment itself: When you're content with whatever food you get, whatever clothing you get, whatever shelter you get, he says 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 photo shows him raising his hands proudly in

victory. Well, the pride that comes with that 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 other people didn't see them.

Then he goes further. One of the ways he has of expressing the path is in 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, through their own efforts, find a deathless happiness. There are a lot of people, even people nowadays who teach the Dhamma, who shy away from that possibility because of the effort demanded.

Conviction in the Buddha's 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 the example of his life. So conviction takes something out of you. It 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 motivate yourself so that you really are willing and happy to put forth the effort.

The same with mindfulness, concentration, discernment: These things require work. But in order to develop them, there's going to be an element of conceit. So you have to watch out for that. The conceit simply that "This is something I can do. Other people can do it, why can't I?" is a type of conceit that's necessary. This confidence in yourself is necessary. But 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.

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 to escape from them. That makes a lot of sense because these things are obviously areas where the mind can get trapped. What's more subtle is that the Buddha talks at one point how he saw that even with the five faculties—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.

In other words, he saw a problem where nobody else saw problems. And he was able to find a solution to the problem. 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, "This sense of peace or security I'm feeling right now: Is there still a drawback to this?" 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 the 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; complacency about what little insights you get. You have to be constantly on the lookout for the dangers these things contain. When you get an insight, look at what the mind is doing 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 unbinding. Every other truth is a representation, a sign. And 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, to set 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 past 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. And 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? Or would you rather keep the door open to see how far you can actually go?