

## *Capture Your Imagination*

*January 9, 2010*

One of the Buddha's teachings that we don't like to hear is that it's through persistent effort that we put an end to suffering and stress. We don't like to hear it because we think persistent effort means drudgery, a chore. But that's not necessarily the case. The Buddha talks about bringing joy to the practice, finding happiness, finding rapture and pleasure and ease in the practice.

So what kind of effort involves joy? Think of some activity—a game, a sport, a skill—that has captured your imagination. You find yourself working at it, not because anybody's forcing you, but because you enjoy doing it. That's the kind of effort, the kind of attitude the Buddha recommends that you bring to the practice.

Ajaan Fuang used to say that you should play with the meditation. Don't be grim about it. Now, "playing" here doesn't mean that just fooling around. It's more like playing a sport or a game that you find particularly interesting—something you want to master, something you want to win at. So as you sit here focusing on the breath, ask yourself: Where is the sport? Where is the game? How do we win at it? Where is the enjoyment?

Part of it lies in exploring the breath and seeing what you can learn about the breath. You've got this breath element in the body. If that concept is foreign to you, you might want to look at how you experience in-and-out breathing. We know that when you breathe in air comes through the nose and goes into the lungs, and then it comes out from the lungs and goes back out the nose. But is that all there is to the breathing? What else is going on in the body? How are the muscles of the rib cage involved? How are the muscles of your abdomen involved? Even more subtly, how about your neck? How about your shoulders? How about your jaw? How about your legs and arms? To what extent are they involved in the breathing process, too?

As you're learning about the breath, you're also beginning to learn about your mind: noticing how it picks up an object, stays with it for a while, then gets bored and wants to find something else. What can you do to bring it back? To keep it interested? How can this capture your imagination? This skill of learning how to stay with the breath regardless of whatever obstacle comes up, whether it's pain, or boredom, or whatever: How do you stick with it? It's very similar to an act of the imagination. And this is where the game aspect comes in.

I was reading once about how they've done a study on how people use their imagination, and there are basically four steps that you're doing. One is that you create your imaginary world. And if you know anything about the Buddha's teachings on becoming, you'll realize that this is immediately relevant to the state of mind that you're creating as you breathe in and breathe out and try to develop concentration. You're creating something.

Then you want to hold it in mind. And then, as you hold it in mind, you want to try changing it here and changing it there. Then you gauge the results of what happens when you change it.

So there are four processes: the creating, the holding, the changing, and then the evaluating. It's like deciding you're going to tell a story. You get that world of the story in your mind. Try to bring it into being. Imagine it. And then hold it there in your imagination. Look at the characters. Look at the situation. Then ask yourself, what if the characters did this? What if the characters did that? Then you evaluate it. Would that be a good story? If you don't like it, then you go back and make other changes. And you keep working at this.

It's very similar to the process the Buddha talked about in terms of the four bases of success.

They start out with the desire to do something. That's the element of letting something capture the imagination. Then you stick with it. That's the creating and the holding. Then you examine it: Make some changes and then evaluate the changes. So: desire, persistence, and the careful attention of holding, and then evaluation. These are all important aspects of the concentration. You're creating a world of the mind here. And as in any story—if you're telling, say, a story about a magical universe—you don't want something really incongruous coming in, unless that's the kind of story you want to tell. But that's not the kind of story we're telling here. We're trying to tell a story of the body here in the present, with the mind alert, watching what's going on, and working with the breath, exploring the breath here in the body.

So, think of the breath and then hold it in mind. Pay careful attention to what you've got here and then try changing it to see what happens. Make the breath longer, make it shorter, think of it coming in and out the back of your neck, in and out the base of your spine, running down your legs. If the breath energy going down the body seems to drain your energy, think of it coming up. If breath energy coming up your body seems to make you tense, let it go down. This is something that Hakuin the Zen master once called Zen sickness, a persistent headache that comes from basically letting the breath energy come up too much. Things begin to

get stuck in your head. The energy doesn't have any way of releasing itself and going back down.

So play with it. See what works. See what becomes interesting. See where it becomes a good place to stay. It's not the case that, when you meditate, you don't use your imagination at all. Actually, you have to use it very actively. You're creating a world in the mind—but not solely in the mind. It's also in the body. As you may have noticed, when you're thinking about things, there's a spot of tension or a pattern of tension someplace in the body that goes along with the thought. This means that any act of the imagination, any act of the mind, will involve an aspect of the body as well. This is why, if you don't occupy the body fully, other worlds are going to come in and invade. So you've got to fully occupy your body, make sure that this world that you're creating here doesn't get destroyed, doesn't get undermined.

You're exploring the world of the body here in the present moment. You're exploring the world of the mind here in the present moment as it's aware of the body, alert to what's going on, and involved in this process of trying to maintain this state of concentration. If it seems wobbly or unstable or not yet comfortable, what can you do to change it? Then evaluate the changes you've tried. See if they work. See if they don't. If they don't work, then try to imagine a different way of changing things.

You may have noticed this when reading Ajaan Lee's instructions for meditation, especially in his Dhamma talks. In *Keeping the Breath in Mind*, he gives you some basic principles, but in his Dhamma talks he plays with all kinds of other ways of playing with the breath, ways of conceiving the breath energy in the body: breath energy that spins around; breath energy that moves from one part of the body to another, back and forth; breath energy that just stays still. He also talks about levels of the breath energy: the breath coming in and out through the lungs, the energy that courses through your blood vessels as the blood runs through them, the energy that courses through your nerves, or the still breath energy that can be contacted at some of the chakras, like the one in the middle of the chest. There's lots to explore here, lots to play with.

So even though it involves effort, try to make it an enjoyable effort. See what aspects of the breath energy capture your imagination, what aspects of keeping the mind still and at ease in the present moment capture your imagination. Some people might call this escapism—in that you're creating an imaginary world in the mind—but the path *is* a creation. It's a fabrication. Sometimes you get the idea that when the mind is practicing just being present, practicing bare awareness, just letting things arise and pass away without commenting, without trying to change

them at all, that somehow that's not a fabrication. Well, the intention to keep that level of awareness going: That is a fabrication. It is experimenting with the present moment, putting an input into what's going on in the present moment. And if you don't admit that, if you don't realize it, that closes off any openings for insight to arise—because a large part of insight lies in seeing your present participation in creating the present moment. You want to see that participation. If you don't see that, there's no chance for any really penetrating insight to come about at all.

What are you doing to the present moment? How do you create your awareness of the present moment? What can you do to do it more skillfully? And how many levels of refinement can you find in that participation? It's in investigating these questions: That's where insight arises.

So it's best to be conscious at the very beginning that you are playing around, and that, as the mind gets more and more still, you can see the processes more clearly. This not just any kind of playing around, just any kind of escapism. It's a very clear, focused, purposeful way of playing with the present moment so that you can understand all these processes more clearly.

So it is a game, but it's a game that you play in earnest. And the best way to do it well is to allow it to capture your imagination. What's going on here? What is this awareness in the present moment? When they talk about the mind going here, going there, it does it really go? What goes? What stays? And if there's a lapse in mindfulness, which part of the mind is aware of the lapse and which part is not? To what extent is the mind lying to itself when it slips off from one train of thought to another? You think you're on one train and all of a sudden you find yourself on another. What happened? Where did you make the jump? And how did you disguise that fact from yourself?

These are really interesting things to explore. And the best way to explore them is to play with them, like picking up a basketball and learning how to shoot and then finding out that you enjoy it.

It's when you find that there are difficulties that you want to practice your skill. So you practice and practice and practice—not because anybody's forcing you, but because you find that it's really interesting. And as you play with the mind in this way, you learn an awful lot. A lot of serious issues get resolved.

So try to bring this attitude of play to the effort that's involved in putting an end to suffering and stress. Try to bring this attitude of joy. Allow it to capture your imagination, so that you're giving it your whole-hearted participation. It's this whole-heartedness, whole-mindedness: That's what allows insights to arise.