

## *Enlightenment is Not a Hot Dog*

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If someone asked you if a knife is a good thing, you'd reply, "Well, it depends on how you use it." If you use the knife to kill somebody, it's obviously a bad thing. If you use it to perform life-saving surgery, to slice food, to cut away the ropes tying somebody down, then it's a good thing. The same principle applies to meditation techniques. Whether a technique is good or not depends on what you do with it. So it's not just a question of whether the technique is right for you, it's what are you giving to the technique?

Here, we're focusing on the breath, being with the breath as it comes in, as it goes out, noticing where you feel the breathing in the body, not just at the nose, but anywhere in the body where the process of breathing is clear and the sensations are clear—now the breath is going in, now the breath is going out—and trying to figure out what rhythm of breathing, what texture of breathing feels best for the body right now.

That right there demands more than just following instructions. You have to bring your sensitivity to the breathing. And this applies to all meditation techniques. It's the sensitivity that you bring to it that really matters, that makes all the difference. Because you're trying to learn to be more sensitive to your own mind, and the technique is simply a way of developing that process of sensitivity, giving you something to focus on to develop your sensitivities.

After all, the things we're trying to find here, the things we're trying to learn here are already happening. They're already here. They've been here for a long time. It's just that our sensitivities are too crude. No technique on its own is going to do this for you to develop those sensitivities. You have to bring what sensitivity you have and apply it, and develop it.

The sensitivity here focuses on several things. 1: What's your intention? 2: What are you doing? 3: What are the results that you're getting? And then 4: If you're not getting the results you want, what can you do to go back and change your intention, or to change what you're doing?

Ajaan Lee has a nice analogy. He says it's like learning how to weave a basket. A teacher can teach you that this is how you weave things. This vine here goes over that vine there, how you put together the framework for the basket, and how you weave around the framework. That's something the teacher can teach. That's the technique. But whether the basket's going to be a good basket or not, a beautiful basket or not, that depends on your sensitivity. You have to be sensitive to what you're doing. Then you look at the basket. Are you getting good results? If you're not, can you figure out what you did wrong? Then you go back and you try it again, changing what you did. You're still weaving, you're still following the instructions, but now you're following with a little bit more sensitivity, and you find that you get better results.

This is how the meditation develops in a formal sense—in other words, you have a more pleasant experience sitting here; the mind settles down, gets more quiet—and in terms of what you bring to your life. The sensitivity you develop here is something you should apply to noticing what the mind is doing as other things that come up in your life: when it's creating greed, when it's creating anger. And the mind does create these things. They're not simple automatic reactions. It's a learned habit. And you want to be able to figure out, what are the different strands in this habit? How are you weaving them together in an unskillful way? Can you weave them together in a more skillful way?

The breath is a good place to learn this, because the basic strands of the different habits we have, called fabrication, or *sankhara*, start with the breath. This is the bodily fabrication. And it's a good one to start out with because, say, anger arises, and the breath becomes our enemy. You start breathing in a way that aggravates the anger, on top of the perceptions that sparked the anger. And the various stories you tell yourself about the situation that can also aggravate the anger. Then you've got the breath uncomfortable, tight, constricted, giving an even greater edge to the stories. So you want to learn how to breathe through any tension in the body, breathe through any tightness in the breath, open up the breath channels in the body. It's a basic skill. Then you want to bring that skill to bear any time anger arises, any time fear arises, greed, jealousy, any unskillful emotion. Ask yourself: "How am I breathing right now? How does this breathing aggravate the problem? Can I breathe in a different way?"

Then there are perceptions. You learn as you focus on the breath that there are different ways of perceiving the breath. You can perceive it simply as air coming in and out of the lungs, and the lungs are kind of like a big bellows. You suck the air in and you force the air out. That's one perception of breathing. But then you can perceive the breath as an energy field that picks up energy not only in the lung area but also anywhere in the body. The whole nervous system gets involved in the breathing process. And if you hold that perception in mind for a while, you begin to see that it really does work that way. This provides a much more comfortable way of breathing, less constricted, less forceful, and more nourishing for the body. This too makes you more sensitive to the role of perception.

The fact that you're trying to think about the breath continually and evaluate the breath, that's called verbal fabrication. This too, is a fabrication that's involved in the meditation. It's also involved in your different emotions. So you learn how to keep the mind with the breath, learn to think about the breath in a way that's helpful, how to evaluate the breath. When you decide it's good enough, when it's not good enough, what criteria do you use? And you get more and more sensitive to the effect the way you think about the breath and you evaluate has on the actual breathing process. And how, when the breath gets comfortable, it has a corresponding effect on the thoughts.

As you learn how to analyze things in this way, then you can apply it to emotions that come up in the course of the day. But you have to consciously apply these things. You can't

expect that you're going to do some meditation and it's automatically going to take care of your problems for the rest of the day.

Ajaan Fuang, my teacher, had a student whose powers of concentration were very strong. She was a schoolteacher. And she complained to him that she didn't see any effect in her life from the meditation. She'd get into meditation, the mind would settle down and be very still. And then she'd come out, and she'd go back to her old ways. And she never thought of applying the skills of meditation to her life. She thought that meditation would automatically redo her mind, make her wiser, make her less deluded. Well, it doesn't work that way.

As my teacher said, you've got to take the skills of the meditation and consciously apply them. This is another way that you develop your sensitivity. And the lessons come in bits and pieces. We may have an idea that we want a particular insight, great insights into *anicca*, *upekkha*, impermanence, equanimity, dependent co-arising, but you don't get there unless you focus on the nitty-gritty of everyday life. When greed arises, how does it arise? If you want to understand dependent co-arising, you've got to look at your greed. You've got to look at your anger. And sometimes it doesn't help to have the fancy labels affixed.

Just look at what you're doing, and to what extent are you causing stress by the way you think? Are you causing stress by the way you breathe? And if you keep looking for the insights at the end, you're going to miss the gradual insights that are making you more and more sensitive as you go along. And it's not always the case that one teacher's version of the necessary insight is going to be the insight that actually makes the difference for you.

There's a sutta called The Riddle Tree, where a monk goes around and asks various monks who are reputed to be arahants, What was the key insight that led to awakening? And one monk says, it was seeing things in terms of the five aggregates. Another one says, it was seeing things in terms of the six sense media. Another one said, dependent co-arising. Another one said, the six elements. Another one said, impermanence. So this doesn't make sense to the first monk: All these different insights, how could they all work in the same way? So he goes to see the Buddha. And the Buddha says, "There's a tree. They call it the Riddle Tree." Apparently a lot of riddles were written about it because the tree had very sharp differences in its appearance from one season to the next.

It's like our coral tree here in front of the bathhouse. In one season, the branches are totally bare. In another season, you've got the leaves. In another season, you've got the leaves falling off and then there are the flowers. And then the flowers bear their seeds. So how would you describe the tree? Well, it depends on the season when you saw it. That's how you would describe the tree. It's all the same tree, but it shows different aspects in different seasons. And the Buddha said awakening is the same sort of thing. For some people, the key insight is related to the five aggregates. For others, it's related to the four noble truths. For others, it's related to the six sense media. And you find that as you focus on these things, they overlap more and more, so they're not really separate topics. You start with one particular topic and you work in

on it, and you discover the other topics are related.

So it's best not to have a preconceived notion that "This is the insight I want, and I'm not going to be interested in anything else that comes along in the meantime." Because, again, insight is incremental. Your sensitivity grows incrementally. And as you begin to see an instance of how you create unnecessary suffering, either in the way you breathe, or the way you think about issues, or the perceptions or feelings you hold about those issues, your sensitivity grows.

So you have to use your imagination in addition to the technique. Imagination is composed of four elements. First you get something in mind, and then second, you hold it. So you tell yourself to think about the breath, and then you watch the breath, you hold that perception in mind. You're going to stay with the breath energy.

Then, third, you try changing it. Suppose you have a picture in your mind. Okay, try changing the picture. Play with the details.

Do you like the new picture? You evaluate it. That's the fourth step: evaluating the changes. Does this make it better, or does it make it worse?

If it makes it worse, go back. Try different changes, different ways of adjusting.

It's the same with the breath—and the same with the practice as a whole. You give rise to a state of concentration simply by focusing on the breath. And then you try to maintain it. And then you change the breath. Does this change work? Is it better, or is it worse? You evaluate it. And if you don't like what you've got, then you try to use your ingenuity to figure out another way to change it. This principle applies not only to the breath, but also to your perceptions, the way you perceive the breath, the picture you have in the mind. What is the breathing process?

And the same principle applies to other issues in life. Someone makes you angry, well, exactly what is the perception you're holding in your mind that sparks that anger? Why is it that one person can say something and it doesn't disturb you, but another person says exactly the same thing in exactly the same tone of voice, and it's got you worked up for hours? What was the difference? What was the perception that got in the way that second time? These are the little insights that help you with the bigger ones. They lead in that direction. You're looking very directly at the mind's process, its processing of experience.

Because what the Buddha said, what we experience is not just influences from the past, sankharas from the past, it's also sankharas we contribute right now as we take the raw material and turn it into an actual experience. We tend to think that the experience comes and then we react to it, but that's not the whole truth. We have our own input into the experience. You want to get more sensitive to that, so that your input is more skillful. The technique helps point you to the main strands as you weave your experience: the strand of the breath, the strand of your perceptions, the strand of the way you direct your thoughts and evaluate things. The technique can point you there, but what you're going to see depends on your own powers of discernment, your own sensitivity, and the imagination, the ingenuity that you bring to it.

So you find that you look at the baskets you weave and say, I don't like those baskets. I want

something better. You go back and figure out what the problem was. And you keep at it. And the baskets get better.

So you have to use some independent thinking with your technique. You can't hope that the technique is going to do all the work for you. That'd be like putting your brain through a factory, like hot dog factories, where basically whatever gets put into the factory comes out hot dog, whether it's meat, or whatever body parts or insect parts or who knows what. It's all hot dog in the end.

Enlightenment is not a hot dog. It's the process of developing your own sensitivity. You can't put the mind through a machine that's going to make it one. You use the technique in the same way that you use a knife. You learn how to use your knife skillfully so that you don't harm yourself, you don't harm other people. That way, it becomes a beneficial tool. The knife sitting on its own is neither here nor there, neither good nor bad. It's what you do with it. The same with meditation techniques. The technique itself is neutral. It's how you understand the technique, it's how you use it, that's what makes all the difference in the world.