

Use Your Imagination

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Your imagination can often be an enemy to your practice. You can imagine that it's impossible to gain results. Or you can imagine all the fun things you could do if you broke the precepts or didn't meditate tonight. Or you could just sit here creating all kinds of imaginary worlds to entertain yourself—or torment yourself, as the case may be.

But it's not so much that imagination is bad; it's simply that you don't know how to use it. There's a Pali term, *patibhāna*, which can be translated as imagination, ingenuity, or inventiveness. And this, the Buddha said, can be a positive element in the path. In fact, when he talks about the qualities you should know about yourself, as you gauge how far you've come in the path, the skill with which you use your *patibhāna* or imagination is one of the things that you should notice and try to develop in a helpful direction.

Classically, it means taking what you've already learned and figuring out how to develop new ideas and approaches from that—approaches that are skillful and ways of thinking that are skillful—because the Buddha doesn't lay everything out in his teachings. Sometimes he'll make passing references to things, and you have to fill in the blanks yourself. This is an important element in your *patibhāna*, your imagination.

Ajaan Maha Boowa talks about this a lot, too. In one of his talks about his various approaches for dealing with pain, he said he would come up with an approach one night that would work really well. Then he'd try it again the next night, and it wouldn't work at all, which meant he had to keep manufacturing new approaches. He'd try to figure out exactly, "What's the problem tonight? What's the difference between tonight and last night?"

It involved experimenting and finding that not everything he would imagine or come up with was going to work. Every now and then, though, he would find something that would work.

This is an attitude you have to take toward the practice. You have to be willing to experiment. You have to be willing to fail so that you can learn from your failure. The type of practice that wants everything guaranteed from the beginning—"I'll do this and nothing bad will ever happen": That's an unrealistic attitude.

When they talk about not being attached to outcome, it means that you're willing to test things. If something doesn't work out, you admit that it doesn't

work out, but that doesn't mean you just leave it at that. You try to figure out what went wrong and then try to come up with a new solution.

That story I tell of Ajaan Fuang, getting his orders from Ajaan Lee to go down and move that cornerstone under the ordination hall: Ajaan Fuang didn't see how it was going to work. And sure enough, they tried various ways of moving it the next day, and none of them worked at all. But when Ajaan Fuang went back to talk to Ajaan Lee about this, he didn't just go and say, "Well, we failed," and leave everything up to Ajaan Lee to come up with a solution. In the meantime, he had tried to come up with a solution on his own.

It's important, when things don't work, that you try to figure out, "Well, what *would* work?" And you give that a try. It's not the case there's just one way that things will work in the mind, because the mind doesn't have just one set of defilements. It has lots of different defilements. Greed, aversion, and delusion can come in 108 different forms, and maybe 108 is too small a number. If you want to just memorize a few principles and hope that those few things will take care of everything, the defilements will eat you up. You've got to be willing to come up with new ideas on your own.

When you stop and think about your imagination, you see that there are basically four functions. One is the ability to picture something in the mind, and next is the ability to hold that picture in your mind. The third is the ability to make changes in the picture, and the fourth is the ability to evaluate the changes. As a good meditator, you need to use all four functions. Think up something and then hold it in mind. Then run a few tests on it—and some of the tests you can do in your imagination first. If you see that something's not going to work at all, you can discard it. But then there are other things that seem to work okay in your imagination. That's when you actually put them to the test in your practice.

This principle applies both to dealing with negative things that come up—learning how to say No to your bad habits—and to learning how to say Yes to potential good habits that you ordinarily might not be able to imagine yourself doing. You need to use your imagination both ways. When you're saying No to an addiction, you have to be able to imagine yourself sticking with that determination. And there's going to be part of the mind that tries to undermine that. You have to imagine ways of dealing with that. You can't let yourself just get shot down quickly, the way you have been in the past.

If it seems too big a thing to make a vow that forever and ever and ever you're never going to break, say, any one of the precepts, what's wrong with saying, "Well, every time the issue comes up, I'll deal with it firmly"? After all, it's not going to be forever and ever. It's not that you're tempted to break a precept 24

hours a day, seven days a week, 365 days a year. The temptations come and go. So you make a vow, “Okay, when they come up, I’ll be able to say No. I’ll make that a law inside my mind.”

If the temptation seems persistent, you can ask yourself, “Well, why can’t I be more persistent than it?” What is the temptation, but one part of your mind? So why can’t another part of your mind, the skillful part of your mind, be just as persistent, just as insistent, just as tenacious? Learn how to imagine that. And if the temptation comes up with different arguments, you’ve got to be able to counter the arguments. Use your imagination for that, too. Don’t give in easily.

As for the positive things, Yes: Imagine that you’ll be able to gain awakening. This path will work, and it’ll work for you. You’ll make it work. And if the mind comes up with obstacles, remember that’s part of your imagination right there: the obstacles it creates. So you have to learn how to change the obstacle. It comes up with this objection? You come back with a counter-objection. Or you can examine: Exactly how far does its objection go? How true is it?

It may say, “In the past, I’ve always been weak and wavering, and I’ve never been able to make anything of myself.” Well, what’s motivating that assertion? It’s the unwillingness to put yourself out a little bit more. Do you want to stay weak and wavering that way for the rest of your life and on into other lives? No. You say, “Well, I can change.” It may be a step-by-step-by-step process, so learn how to imagine it as step-by-step. Then learn how to encourage yourself when you *have* made a step. In other words, learn how to use your *patibhana*—your imagination and ingenuity—as an aid on the path.

We’re using our imagination all the time. It’s part of the anticipation that gives rise to states of becoming in the mind. We anticipate that a particular thought world is going to be fun, so we create it. And if you don’t like your creation, well, you change it here and you change it there a little bit. Then you get in and you ride. If you can do that with unskillful things, why can’t you do it with skillful things? Right concentration is a state of becoming, and the anticipation that you’re going to be able to do it is an important part of being able to actually do it. So learn how to use your imagination in that way.

Pains come up, and the old techniques that have worked for you in the past don’t work this time? Well, it doesn’t mean that this is an impossible pain. It simply means it’s a different kind of pain. Or the clinging that’s creating the problem around the pain, the craving that’s creating the problem around the pain is a slightly different kind of clinging or craving. So use your imagination.

When the Buddha talks about taking stock of your imagination, he has you pair it with your learning. Think of what you’ve learned in the past. For instance,

what the Buddha had to say about how suffering comes from clinging to any one of the five aggregates: Which aggregate are you clinging to? Which form of clinging are you holding on to? His terms of analysis are meant to be food for your imagination, to open up possibilities.

Maybe you think of the pain as a physical thing, but remember it's a feeling. The feeling is connected with perceptions, and it's connected with thought constructs. What kind of thoughts are you constructing around the pain? What kind of perceptions are you applying to the pain? What exactly is the feeling? And how does the feeling differ from the body—the physical part? The body is the four elements; the feeling is something else. The perception is something else. We tend to glom all these things together, but the Buddha, in teaching these things as separate events, is giving you food for thought.

The teachings are there not only as a description of the path, but also as an incitement to the path: food for your imagination, so that this quality of *patibhāna*—your imagination, your ingenuity, your inventiveness—can actually become a help rather than a hindrance.