

Supervised Play

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There's a passage where the Buddha lists six qualities to look for in yourself as you're practicing to gain a sense of where your strengths are, where your weaknesses are, so that you can build on your strengths and work on your weaknesses. And one of the qualities is ingenuity. The Pali word is *patibhāna*. It can mean ingenuity, or quick wittedness: your ability to think on your feet, your ability to think for yourself.

It's a quality that many of us miss in the meditation, especially if you've been doing a type of meditation where the instructions are all laid out: You have to do this, this, this and don't think about it, just do it. That approach to meditation, of course, destroys ingenuity.

But it's hard to imagine how you could develop discernment without thinking for yourself, without asking questions, without experimenting. That's one way that you can look at the practice: as a way of experimenting to overcome addictions. In this case, it might not be addiction to a specific drug or intoxicant. The Buddha talks in more general terms about falling for the intoxication of life, the intoxication of youth, and the intoxication of good health. He says we act like drunk people because of these things, forgetting the dangers down the line, that the good health is not going to last forever. Your youth is not going to last forever. Your life is not going to last forever. Aging, illness, and death are going to take your youth, your health, and your life away. So what are you going to do about it?

One of the things I've noticed about people who are addicted is that they lack imagination. They can't think of themselves giving up the addiction. They can't imagine finding happiness without their drug of choice. So that's one of the first things you have to do to overcome your intoxication with youth, health, and life. You have to imagine that there's an alternative form of happiness, that there's a practice leading to that happiness, and that you're going to be able to do the practice. You're capable of attaining a pleasure, a sense of well-being, that's unlike any other. With other forms of well-being, you need to cling, you need to feed. With nibbana you don't. In fact it's through letting go of your clinging and emotional or mental feeding that you can actually attain true happiness.

That right there is something that defies our ordinary way of thinking about life. It requires that we expand our concept of what's possible and where we would like to devote our energies. At the same time, it's important to realize that as we go through life, we're not just passive recipients of things coming in from outside. We're shaping our experience. So it's important to learn new ways of shaping things—because, after all, this goal that we'll attain is, as the Buddha said, something we've never reached before, something we've never known before, something we've never realized before. You're not going to attain it by doing all the things you've done before. You got to learn to do new things.

So we're asked to look at something that's very ordinary, something present all the time, and look at it in a new way, work with it in a new way. It's the breath. It's very

close to us. It's the most immediate thing that we experience outside of the mind. If you close your eyes, you realize that the movement of energy in the body is what allows you to know that you've got a body. All of your other ways of sensing the body have to come through the breath, the sense of energy that permeates throughout the nervous system. So get in touch with that. That's one of the processes of fabrication by which we shape our experience. And so it's good to think of new ways to shape it.

To think of possibilities and then to test them to see if they actually work: This is how you push the envelope. When you breathe in, what is it like to think of breathing into the back of your neck, or some other part of the body you've never thought about breathing in before? It can be anywhere in the body. See what that does, how it changes things inside. See whether the change is for good or for bad. This is how you develop your powers of judgment, your ability to detect for yourself what's skillful and what's not.

When you have an illness or an injury, use it as an opportunity to learn something new about the breath. It's important that the breath capture your imagination. You've got this range of energy in the body, this field of energy in the body in which you can play. And it's not just in the body. There's also a cocoon of energy around the body. How do you sense that? Is your cocoon ragged? Is it smooth? Does it have big gaping holes? Or does it provide you with good protection? Those are some questions you can ask.

This is how you learn. Ask questions that you may never have asked yourself before. Play around with things. When we read the books from the teachers of the past, it's not so that we can imitate them down to the last little letter. They give us an idea of what's possible, some useful questions they asked themselves that we may never have thought of asking ourselves. Then try to take those lessons and apply your own ingenuity to them. Try their approaches for a while and see what works. If it doesn't quite work, well, what adjustments can you make?

There's a study of imagination that said there are basically four steps to imagining something. One is just creating a picture in your mind. The second is holding the picture in your mind. The third is making changes in the picture. And the fourth is evaluating the changes. This is how you create new things. This is how artists create new works of art.

It's also how scientists learn new things on the frontiers of knowledge. They've got to picture the thing in their mind, and then ask, well what if you changed the picture a little bit? First you've got to hold it in mind and then you make a change. And then you look at it. How about that change? What does it imply? Then they try to figure out some way to test it. So this is not just an exercise in pure imagination for its own sake. It's imagination in the service of gaining knowledge.

So here you are on the frontier of your own knowledge about your mind, about what's possible in the mind. You've got to experiment in order to expand those frontiers.

Think about the Buddha: Everybody told him that a deathless happiness was impossible. There was nothing you could do to gain anything of that sort: a happiness that did not depend on feeding on either physical food or mental food. That, they said, was impossible. It wasn't even on the range of people's radar that that would be a

possibility to think about.

And yet the Buddha asked himself these questions about the types of happiness a human being could attain, and whether there could be a deathless happiness, and then he put his life on the line to test that possibility. He basically said, "Here I am acting this way, based on this or that assumption, and it's getting me nowhere. Why am I doing this? Why can't I change?"

So he tried changing this activity, that approach, and some of his experiments ended up failures. But he learned from the failures. He learned some important lessons. So even with the failures, the efforts and the ingenuity were not totally lost.

This is how he came to realize that there are new ways of training the mind that he had never thought of before. And of course they brought results that he had never expected before. We have his example. He gives us some parameters, but a lot of the skill in following his example lies in learning where you can play, where you can make adjustments, where you use your own ingenuity. I'm always scared of methods that say that everything has been thought out, everything has been worked out, so just do what you're told. There's so much of that out there. But how are you supposed to gain any insight at all if you just do what you're told? It's like putting your mind into a machine, letting the machine grind it up.

Now, the Buddha does give you some advice as to where to look and what approaches to try. You're at play here, but it's not totally unsupervised. You're not thrown out onto an empty field and told, well play. You've got the example of others. It's like going out to a playground where they have a good set of playground equipment and you can play some of the things that other people have done and you can think of new games using that playground equipment. You see how other people play and then you try your own variations. And then you decide to learn a sport.

I remember for me one of the big revelations when we moved from a little farming community where I was born and grew up, and moved into the suburb and went to a very large school, was that they had phys ed. We had never had that before. We just had recess. At phys ed, they actually taught you specific games. So you learned some skills. But even within the rules of the games, there was plenty of room for using your ingenuity.

So remember, you've got this whole field of your breath energy to play in. You've got Ajaan Lee's recommendations on different ways of thinking about the breath. And you notice that even after he wrote his instructions in Method Two, he continued playing with various ways of conceiving the breath. For instance, he talked about the breath coming up the spine. In his Method Two, he had originally talked about the breath going down the spine. But there are times when the breath coming up the spine is useful. The breath coming up from the navel all the way up to the nose: That's another breath that wasn't mentioned in the original instructions. The breath energy spinning around in place, the breath energy that moves back and forth, all kinds of breath energy in the body: They have their uses. You may be sitting here experiencing some pain or stiffness. What can you do you do to utilize the breath in order to alleviate that?

There are different qualities of the breath. Ajaan Lee talks about *lom nieuw*, which is really difficult to translate. *Lom* means breath, and *nieuw* means sticky or tough. It's a

breath energy that doesn't have to move. It fills the body. It feels solid. It gives a certain strength and groundedness to your meditation. If you think of a tough breath in your back, it makes it easier to sit on days when you have back pain. When the mind is feeling wired, think of the breath being really, really solid so that it can give you some grounding.

There are other times, though, when it's more useful to think about the fact that most of the atoms in your body are space. A large part of your atoms are space. There's very little actual matter in there. When you hold that in mind, everything gets opened up and very light.

So there's lots to explore here, lots to play with, and it's in the playing that you learn about the process of fabrication. The play itself is precisely the process of fabrication. As the Buddha says, you've been shaping your life in an unskillful way, but if you learn how to shape it in a better way, it turns into the path. You get more sophisticated about how you shape things. You get more sensitive, until you finally reach the point where you discover how not to fabricate anything at all. That's difficult. It requires a real leap of the imagination that that could be a possibility, too. But you get there by learning from your experiments.

And you keep experimenting because it's fun. You learn a lot. It's the learning that comes from experimentation and playing around that brings a real sense of accomplishment—a sense of accomplishment in finding a solid well-being and developing your discernment at the same time.