

## *Ironclad Technique vs. No Technique*

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When you're practicing meditation, there are two extremes to be avoided. One is the attitude that you're given a technique and you have to follow it to the letter, without any variations. The other is to be told that there is no technique. Just be aware of whatever is coming up, telling yourself not to do anything in particular. In neither way can you really develop discernment.

As the Buddha said, the Dhamma is to be found by committing yourself and then reflecting. When he teaches that principle to Rāhula, he teaches him to look at his actions, to look first at his intentions, then at his actions as he's doing them, and then when they're done to see if he's causing any harm. If he's causing harm, he's got to change his ways, to consult with someone else, and to make up his mind not to make that mistake again.

In this way, your reflection is meant to alter your actions. You become more and more sensitive to your actions, your contribution to the present moment. And you can begin to see what's actually causing suffering right now. You can begin to see basically what you're doing, what's causing suffering, what's not causing suffering. You get an inkling of cause and effect, which you don't get if you're told simply to follow a technique and not to pass any judgment on it, just to do the technique.

At the same time, if you're told just to be aware of whatever, you have no sense of what you're doing. The point to having a technique is that it focuses you on your actions, what you're doing in the present moment. This is where you're going to see the process of fabrication in action. This is where you see your intentions in action—all the factors of dependent co-arising that lead up to contact and can shape the course of what's going to happen after the contact, whether it's going to lead to suffering or to no suffering. When you have a technique, you're made more aware of these things.

This is why the ideal approach is to have a technique that allows you to learn how to play with it, make variations in it. This fits in with the analogies that the Buddha uses when he's teaching meditation: the analogy of the cook, the analogy of the carpenter—people who have developed skills based on their powers of observation and who make adjustments based on what they observe.

This was Ajaan Lee's approach. He taught the basic steps in Method 2, although maybe the word "step" is not quite right, because he didn't insist that they had to be followed in any particular order. They're seven component factors

that you put together.

But then in his later teachings he would vary them. In the seven steps he talks about starting with the breath at the back of the neck going down the spine. And as I've noted before, he developed this method after curing himself of a heart attack. Anyone who's had heart problems knows that the back of the neck is Tension Central when you have a heart condition. But it's also important that you learn how to straighten your spine. One of the most conducive ways of straightening your spine is to think of the breath coming in the back of the neck and then going down.

But then there are other times when the back feels weak. And as Ajaan Lee noted in some of his Dhamma talks, in that case you want to start with another kind of breath, the breath in the soles of the feet going up the legs and then up the spine, or the breath starting at the navel and going up the front of the body. Whereas in the seven steps he talked about the breath coming in at the heart and then going down through the intestines.

So there are lots of different ways you can play with the breath. Some of them have to do with the state of your health, the state of your body. Some of them have to do with the state of your mind. Sometimes the mind needs to be awakened, and at other times it needs to be calmed and soothed. Different ways of breathing will function in different ways, and you learn this by playing with the breath. You're gladdening the mind. If you simply put the mind into shackles, saying, "You've got to do this, this, this, and nothing else," there's no joy in that kind of practice. But the pleasure that comes from mastering a skill is one of the highest joys. For a lot of us, our joys come from consuming, taking things in. But there's a higher level of joy that comes from mastering a skill, knowing that you can handle different situations. You've got techniques—plural—that you can apply, depending on what the situation is. This is how you develop your discernment. This is how you see cause and effect.

Think about what scientists do when they want to see what causes what. They don't sit there simply watching something or putting something through one particular test. They'll try different tests, approaching things from different angles, so they can see which connections are simply happenstance and which really are causal. So as you come to the breath, remember that this is an area where you have a technique to start with to get yourself sensitive to what you're contributing to the present, but that you also have to use your powers of observation and you can make variations. This way, you become your own independent observer.

After all, what are we looking for? We're looking for the end of suffering. And who can know better than you whether you're suffering? But if you're not well

trained in being observant, how can you even know? There are many subtle levels of suffering that can go right past you if you're not observant, if you're not sensitive.

If you're simply told to follow a particular technique, then basically it turns into the responsibility of the teacher to confirm whether you've attained a particular level or not. That's handing the power over to the teacher. The meditation is meant to hand power over to you, but also to make you worthy of that power, capable of handling that power. As Buddha said, it's when you reach stream entry that you become independent in the Dhamma. Ajaan Lee's analogy is that it's like reaching maturity. You're now old enough to function as an adult, and adults don't simply do what they're told. True adults have a range of skills that they've mastered, starting with techniques they've been taught, and then learning how to vary them so that they become their own skill. They become the judges of what approach is required at any particular time and what counts as good results.

If you're not sensitive to what you're putting into the present moment, how are you going to know whether a particular state is fabricated or not? There are strong states of oneness that can come in the meditation. And the Buddha says, watch out: These are fabricated. The highest oneness, he says, is a fabricated state. So you have to see the fabrications. You have to learn how to be observant. And to learn how to become observant, you're given a technique and told play with it. This is how you become independent in the Dhamma. This is how your commitment and your reflection lead you to attaining the Dhamma, a Dhamma you can really depend on.