

Patient & Inquisitive

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We all know that passage where the Buddha tells Rahula at the very beginning of his meditation to make his mind like earth. He's basically teaching him patience, equanimity, but then he applies it to instructions on breath meditation. And his instructions on breath meditation are not just to be patient with the breath, be equanimous about the breath. You actively take an interest in the breath to see what you can do with it.

So when he's saying to be like earth, he's not saying to be like being a clod of dirt that just sits there. He's basically telling you to make the mind solid, so that if good or bad things come up, you're not swayed, you're not pushed off, knocked out of line—because you want to understand these things.

After all, the duty with regard to stress or suffering, *dukkha*, is to comprehend it. So you don't just sit there with the *dukkha*; you try to understand it. The Buddha's teaching a combination of solidity and curiosity here.

The solidity gives you ballast. It also reminds you that as you're exploring, as you experiment, you can't just say, "Well, I'll experiment with this particular idea or this particular perception for a few breaths, and if it doesn't work, I'll throw it away and try something else." You have to stick with things to see what results they have over the long term. Sometimes it takes the mind a while to warm up to an idea, or for the breath to respond, or the body as a whole to respond, to whatever perception you're applying. So you need that kind of ballast, and a willingness to sit with things.

Again, you're not just passively enduring. You're actively doing something, and you're going to stick with it until you can be really sure that you know what the results are. This may take time. So it's an active form of patience that the Buddha's teaching.

Aside from that, he's also asking you to be inquisitive. Ask questions. As in those instructions on breath meditation—the sixteen steps: There's so much that's not explained. Here it is, the one technique that the Buddha explained in most detail, and yet there's still a lot you have to figure out on your own. When he talks about calming bodily fabrication, how do you do that skillfully? If you try to stifle the breath, it's not going to work.

Ajaan Lee gives some good recommendations: Think about the breath energy as having

channels that go through the body. Think of the channels all opening up and connecting together. As you think of the body in those ways, as you hold that perception in mind, gradually things do begin to connect, and the breath does become calmer.

Then think of the breath moving through the body faster than you ordinarily think it does. I know some people who say they try to breathe in, and before they've even got the breath down to the stomach, they already feel the need to breathe out. Well, that's one perception you may have about the breath. But there are other layers of breath that have already gone down to the stomach and gone down to the feet just as you begin to breathe in. In the same way that the ocean has currents on many different levels that travel at different speeds, the breath energy in the body travels at different speeds.

So think of a really quick breath energy. As soon as you start breathing in, it's already gone all the way. After all, the breath is already there. It's not as if when you breathe out you've squeezed all the breath out of the body and now you've got to fill it back up again.

What goes out is just a little bit of excess. If you breathe out and stop, there's still breath energy in the body. As the breath starts coming in, it simply infiltrates the breath energy already there. Hold that perception in mind. It makes it easier for the breath energies to work their way through the body.

Then, as the breath energies get comfortable, when the Buddha then talks about allowing yourself to breathe in a way that's sensitive to rapture, breathe in a way that's sensitive to pleasure, the pleasure and the rapture can flow quickly and fill the whole body.

But notice: The Buddha puts these instructions only in a very spare outline form. It's up to us to try to figure out what he means, and then how to make use of what he said. That's going to require our curiosity because, after all, he says a lot of things that are counterintuitive. We suffer because we cling, and clinging is like feeding. We think feeding is a good thing; it's our number one attachment.

They say that during WWII, when people were in concentration camps, with the men segregated from the women, the men got tired of talking about sex very quickly. Food, however, became an ongoing conversation topic, one they never got tired of.

So here the Buddha's saying that the way we feed is making us suffer. In fact, the need to feed is his paradigm for suffering. So you have to figure out: What does he mean? And why would that be suffering?

He sets out the four noble truths not simply as a nice thing to think about. He's

challenging you. Each one of the truths is a challenge.

Your cravings are making you suffer. Yet we think that our cravings are what enable us to find happiness. He says it is possible to put an end to craving, even though we've been palling around with craving for who knows how long. It's what brought us here, and it's what's going to carry us on if we don't put an end to it. And the noble eightfold path will put an end to it. How does that work? That's what the meditation is all about—developing the qualities in the mind that can counteract the craving.

There are some paradoxes there. One of the factors of the path is right effort, and right effort involves desire. So you're going to use some of your desires to overcome your other desires, before you finally turn on the desires of the path itself.

So there are paradoxes, there are questions. He's trying to make you think. He wants to make you inquisitive. He wants you to ask questions—and primarily questions about your own mind.

When the mind is thinking in ways that drive you crazy, why is it doing that? We develop concentration so that we can put the mind in a place where it can look at the mind. If we think about the mind as a committee, we're trying to train the members who are the investigators, the watchmen, so that they can watch what's going on in the rest of the mind and try to figure it out.

The Buddha doesn't want us to simply accept the truth of his teachings and say, "Oh yes, it's true there is suffering. Suffering is the clinging. There's the clinging that's caused by the craving." When he says that one of the ways we cling is to our sense of self, he doesn't want us to say, "Yes, we accept the fact that our sense of self is a problem." That's all too abstract.

If we don't challenge ourselves and challenge the teachings to figure out how this could be true, we're never going to be able to get down to the details—because everything is in the details: specific perceptions, specific ways of thinking that are causing us to suffer. If we don't get down to those details, if we just stay with the generalities, it's not going to have much of an effect.

When a particular unskillful thought comes up in the mind, what is the particular trigger, what is the particular allure of that thought? You have to be quick to see these things. They're like the subliminal messages on TV. They're there right before your eyes, but they're so quick that you miss them. We slow things down by staying with the breath. We get so that we can actually see these things that are operating on the surface. We're speeding up our refresh rate.

Think of it that way.

It's like listening to bird songs. Some birds have a squawk that sounds like they're hitting several notes all at once. Actually, they're singing arpeggios. It's just that they're singing them so quickly that human ears can't keep up with them. Our refresh rate is too slow.

It's the same with the mind: A lot of things go on and they all seem to go on at the same time. We glom them all together. But when you get the mind really still, it's as if your refresh rate goes faster. Everything else outside seems to slow down. You can begin to detect steps in the process by which you pick up an idea, run with it, and change it as you run with it. That's the kind of thing you want to see.

So you want to have patience and endurance, but not just for the sake of putting up with things, or accepting things, being content with things. You endure so that you can *understand*. You want to comprehend what's going on.

After all, what could be more fascinating than the way in which the mind creates suffering for itself? Try to take an interest in that.

We spend so much of our lives trying to rearrange things outside, demanding that things be like this, be like that. We think that when our demands are met, we'll be happy. But are we satisfied? No, we're not satisfied. So we think, "Well, maybe it was the wrong demand, or maybe we're not demanding enough." But really, the real issue is inside. We need to take our fascination with the outside world and direct it to the inside world. That's when things can open up inside. That's how this mystery of why it is that we want happiness, but the things we do create suffering, can be solved.

So have the endurance to sit with it, and the curiosity to want to figure it out, confident that it can be figured out. That's what the Buddha's message is all about. He figured it out and he gives us some pointers on how we can figure out our own problems. The large outlines are the same. The details are going to be individual.

I remember when I was staying with Ajaan Fuang: After a couple of years, I suggested to him that he write a guide to breath meditation, because he had so many details you couldn't find in the Ajaan Lee books. He said, "Well, Ajaan Lee covered all the main themes."

My argument was that there are a lot of the little details that are where things really open up. He said, "That's going to be an individual matter. That's where you use your ingenuity." That's where your curiosity has to be focused—because the suffering is in the details—and the solution is in the details.

The purpose of the Dhamma as the Buddha set it out is to point your attention toward the right spots, and to get you to start asking the right questions.

A famous author once said if they can get you asking the wrong questions, it doesn't matter what answers you come up with. But if someone like the Buddha gets you answering the right questions, there are right answers, and they really will make a difference.