

Meditation as Play

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Sometimes, when we learn about the Buddha's teachings on heedfulness, they can sound pretty grim—like the teaching that you should be mindful of death with every in-and-out breath. But the teachings are not meant to be grim. Look at what the Buddha has you do with the breath: In his instructions on how to focus on the mind while you're focusing on the breath, there's nothing that says, "I'll now breathe in, making the mind grim. I'll breathe out, making the mind grim." The instructions are, "I'll breathe in and out, gladdening the mind."

And how do you gladden the mind? You approach the meditation with an attitude of play. This was Ajaan Fuang's recommendation. He would say, "Play with the meditation." Explore. Working with the breath means playing with the breath. What kind of breathing would gladden your mind right now? What way would be fun to breathe? Can you think of breathing in and out through the palms of your hands, the soles of your feet, through the base of your spine? What way of perceiving the breath would make it more interesting right now and have a good effect?

Think of someone learning how to play a guitar: There's a certain amount that you can learn from a guitar teacher, but if you really want to know the guitar, you go into your room, you close the door, and you play. You experiment. You try different chords. You try different melodies. Try to think of new ways of putting your fingers on the strings, on the frets, to make interesting sounds. Some of the sounds may be pretty bad, but every now and then you'll find something good. You want to notice that. You're not just fooling around. You're exploring. In the same way, when you're gladdening the mind, you don't stop with gladdening the mind. Remember, you're learning how to steady the mind or concentrate the mind, and then release the mind. So there's a serious purpose here. You're playing to win.

But to steady the mind, release the mind, you have to know the mind. And what's the best way to know the mind? By trying different things, using different perceptions, focusing on different parts of the body. Try to get a sense of what it means to focus. Can you focus without tensing up around the focal point? And when you focus, are your eyes involved in the process? Can you do it *without* involving the eyes? In other words, be aware of the chest *in* the chest. Be aware of the stomach *in* the stomach. Be aware of the eyes *in* the eyes. Keep these things separate and see what happens. See what it does to your sense of the body.

As the Buddha said, as you get the mind engaged in things like this, you're employing the different aggregates. There's the form of the body in the breath. Feelings of pleasure, pain, neither pleasure nor pain. Perceptions, images of the breath that you hold in mind, that you try out: images of the body that you hold in mind; images of the *mind* that you hold in mind. Where is your mind right now? All too often, we have the sense that it's up in the head. But actually, awareness fills the body. Where do you want to place the center? What happens when you place it further down in the body? Your directed thought and evaluation—that's fabrication. How do you talk to yourself about the breath? How do you talk to yourself about the mind? How do you talk to yourself about what you're doing? And there's consciousness, which is aware of all these things.

There you are: You've got all five aggregates. You're playing with the aggregates, trying to make them into a settled state of mind, a released state of mind. And you've gotten to know them because you've been playing with them. They're your playmates. So when the time comes to let them go, you let them go not out of disgust. You just realize: You can play with them only so far. You've explored their range, what their powers are. Then you can move on with a sense of appreciation.

Think of the image of the raft: You take the raft that you've made to get from the unsafe shore to go across the river to the safe shore. The whole point of the image, of course, is that once you've reached the safe shore, you don't carry the raft with you. But you don't throw it away. As the Buddha said, you have a sense of appreciation: "How useful this raft has been!" But now you don't need it anymore.

So think of the aggregates as your playmates. How do you want to play today? What games can you play to get the mind gladdened, to get the mind to settle down, to release it from its unskillful thoughts? The gladdening comes first. After all, when you're thinking about death, you don't think about it in a grim way or a scary or a fearful way. You want to be able to approach it with an attitude that allows the mind to be in a good mood, so that it doesn't feel overwhelmed. Simply realize: Okay, here's a challenge, but we've had challenges in games before. We've overcome the challenges by playing around. If you can approach the challenges with an attitude of goodwill, a good-natured attitude, a gladdened attitude, it's going to be a lot easier to deal with the difficulties that come.

So heedfulness should lead to joy. The Buddha talks about how we go from suffering to getting a sense of conviction in the teachings. The very next step after that is joy. So remember, you're here to enjoy the meditation. There are so many techniques where they tell you, "Simply follow the instructions. Do what you're

told. Don't do any thinking." That gets very grim very fast. Then there are the instructions that say, "Well, don't do anything at all. Just accept, accept, accept"—which is a *kind* of a method, but it can get pretty depressing, too.

The Buddha has you take the middle ground: Explore. When he says to gladden the mind, he leaves it up to you to ask yourself: What would make your mind glad right now? When you concentrate the mind, how would the mind best like to be concentrated? When you can see that it's weighed down by something, how do you release it? Those are questions for you to explore. And the things you've learned through exploration—*those* are the things you remember. They're *your* discoveries. It's through this exploration, this playing around, that you become sensitive to begin with. The methods that tell you, "Don't think. Just do what you're told," don't make you sensitive to cause and effect. The methods that tell you simply to accept don't make you sensitive, either.

Years back, I was being taken through the public library in Seattle, designed by Rem Koolhaas. I was commenting on the different architectural details. And the woman who was taking us around had known some other monks who had practiced the "accept, accept, accept" meditation. She said to me, "You're not like other monks. You observe things. You notice things"—which really took me aback. As monks, we're *supposed* to notice.

And the best way to learn how to notice, of course, is to approach things with an attitude of play: Try this. See what happens. Try that. See what happens. Learn how to judge things for yourself. That's how you become sensitive. And that's how you develop the discernment that will allow you to get the mind concentrated and released.

So be heedful, but find joy in the heedfulness. When you're heedful, you're appreciative of each breath. And the best way to appreciate each breath is to see what you can do with it. Like getting an egg—what can you do with the egg? Well, you try different dishes. Some of your cooking attempts you have to throw away, but that doesn't matter. You've got lots of eggs. You've got lots of breaths.

Sometimes *that* thought can get a little scary. When you're living in a situation where you have only a little time to meditate every day, those little times are precious and you really appreciate them. Then you come out to the monastery, and you get the whole day. You're told you have nothing to do but be with the breath all day, and all of a sudden it becomes a chore. So instead, tell yourself: You've got the whole day to play with the breath, to get to know this dimension of your awareness. See how ingenious you can be in finding good games to play.