

Actor & Experienter

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Try to be on good terms with the present moment. Learn how to bring yourself to the present moment in a way that you bring in a good mood with you. In other words, stop to think about the fact you've got this opportunity to be with the present moment even if you've been having a bad day, you're having trouble with other people, you're kind of down on yourself. Remind yourself that at least you've got the opportunity to be here in the present moment.

And at the moment, there are no other responsibilities. Think of what a rare opportunity this is in the world. Think of all the people out there who, from the moment they wake up to the moment they go to sleep, are concerned about where the next meal is going to come from, or the dangers they're facing. Life on this planet can be pretty miserable. And here you've got the opportunity to do something about it. So that much is something good to focus on.

Then next step of course is: What are you going to do with the present moment? Well, you've got the breath; you've got the mind. You've got all the raw materials for awakening. It's simply a matter of learning how to put them together in the right way. You don't want to force things too much, but you also don't want to be too lazy about it. This is a matter of learning a skill. As you're learning a skill, don't berate yourself for how long it's taking you, or wonder about how much longer it's going to be before you get results, because that's weighing the present moment down in a way that's not helpful at all. Each moment is an opportunity, so you focus on the opportunity you have right now. As for how long you've been working at this, put that aside. As for how much longer it is going to be, put that aside as well.

I remember several times when I was in Thailand, I'd hear Ajaan Fuang's students commenting on how long they had been practicing, and if he overheard that, he'd immediately jump on them and say, "Don't think about that. You've got this opportunity right now." The way it is with karma, given the fact that karma is so unpredictable, you never know when a breakthrough is going to come. If things aren't going well yet, they could go very well at any moment. And at the very least you can contribute to that.

When you're thinking about karma and the past, that can get you tied up in knots. The whole point of the teaching on karma is that you want to focus on what you can do right now, the opportunities you have right now, and that you want to make the most of them, based on the level of skill and sensitivity that you

have. Don't berate yourself for not being skillful yet, because there's only one way you're going to get skillful, and it's not by berating yourself. It's by applying the skills you have. It's like exercising the body. You don't have to wait till the body is strong before you exercise. You take the body you've got and exercise it, and as you exercise it, it turns into a stronger body.

The same with good qualities in the mind: Your sensitivity may not be what it could be, your understanding of the process of meditation may not be what it could be, but you take what you've got and you apply it. And you learn from applying it.

As you do this, you begin to see that there are two sides to the mind. There's the side that's doing the meditation, and the side that's receiving the results. This is essentially what our sense of self comes down to, these two things: the actor and the experiencer. The actor is the way we identify with certain powers we have, certain abilities we have, because we've found that by using them, we've learned how to alter our surroundings, alter our situation. They seem to be at least somewhat in our power. So that's the self that's the actor.

Then there's the self as the experiencer, the one that gets to experience the pleasure or the pain that comes from our actions.

You want to keep those two sides of the self in the right balance. In other words, with the actor, you want to keep at the meditation, doing the meditation, which is why we have techniques.

A while back I read someone making sneering remarks about meditation techniques, saying that techniques did nothing but get in the way. Actually, though, having a technique is what enables you to have some sense of what your powers are. It gives you a baseline for comparing what's working and what's not. You have to be very clear about what you're doing if you want to learn how to do it well. So you have the technique to provide that clarity, and then you ask yourself: "What are the results I'm getting from the technique? Could I do it better? In what way could I do it better? What does 'better' mean? Do I need more stillness? Do I need more gladness? What's lacking?" Then you take what you learn from that reflection and you apply it to how you continue working with the technique.

This is how the experiencer and the actor can be in proper balance. If you just act, act, act, without noticing how the results are coming, you're going to end up pushing yourself too hard, you're going to end up getting yourself into strange states. You need to be able to modulate and regulate what you're doing. If the experiencer takes over, in other words, there's a sense of ease, a sense of refreshment that comes from the meditation, and you just jump into to like a big

feather bed, then the cause for the ease is going to be undercut. It's like seeing a big cloud and thinking, "Ah, this cloud is going to be comfortable," so you jump into the cloud. Of course, you fall right through. Or think of the analogy I gave this afternoon, of the person who gets a job. You work, work, work, you get your first big paycheck, and then you quit the job and go spending your paycheck. When you run out of money, you come back and try to get another job. Well, for one thing, they're never going to give you a new job that's well-paying, and you'll never build up your capital, never build up your savings.

You want to be the kind of worker who keeps working and keeps saving up, saving up, and spending enough to enjoy, to have some sense of satisfaction that comes from doing the job, but not splurging everything you've got, not quitting the job. There is work to be done, after all. The actor here has to keep on working, so you want the actor and the experiencer to work together like this.

It's in this way that the meditation becomes a skill, and it's also the way you develop the proper attitude toward feelings of pleasure in the meditation. We often think of pleasure as an end in and of itself, but the Buddha's attitude is that pleasure can be a means. Or better: Certain pleasures can be means, certain pleasures are just problems, obstacles in the path, as when you get waylaid by lust, sensual desire, the hindrances, the roots of unskillful behavior. But the pleasure that comes from a centered mind, a clear mind, is something you want to learn how to use. Use it as a means for greater insight; use it as a means for energizing you further on the path.

At the same time, the Buddha said that pain can be a useful means on the path as well. In other words, as you learn how to deal with pain in the course of the meditation, you learn a lot of important lessons about the mind. So pain has its uses too. After all, it is a noble truth. Learning how to understand pain is part of the path.

So you want to be able to learn to use both pleasure and pain in the proper way. This is when the actor and experiencer are properly balanced.

What this means is that you still have a sense of self while you meditate. It's not like you try to erase the "I," erase the "me," in a big oceanic feeling of interconnectedness. Instead, you take your sense of I and me, and you learn how to apply them skillfully so that the actor becomes a skillful actor, the experiencer becomes a connoisseur, a discerning experiencer. This way, your sense of self, instead of being an obstacle in the path, actually becomes a means for developing it. As the Canon says, there's going to be a sense of "I am" all the way up through non-returning, so don't expect to drop it anytime soon.

So as long as you've got it, learn how to use it. This comes down to the principle that Ajaan Lee repeated many times according to Ajaan Fuang, which is that a person of discernment can learn how to use almost anything as a means for furthering mindfulness, furthering concentration, furthering your powers of discernment.

So learn the proper uses for what you've got. How do you learn? Through patience and endurance, using your powers of observation. Remember, this is a skill we're working on. Skills sometimes develop slowly, sometimes quickly. One of our problems in modern society is that in our educational system, people get channeled into areas where they've shown an aptitude. They start specializing very early, and what's missing is the ability to learn in areas where you don't immediately have an aptitude, but are important skills that everybody needs.

Whether the meditation comes easily or not, the important thing is that you apply yourself to understand what's going on in the present moment, what the potentials of the present moment are, how the potential for pleasure can be used, how the potential for pain has its uses, how to make the best use of the potentials from which you create your sense of I, either as the actor or the experiencer.

You've got this opportunity, a whole hour to sit here, and when the hour is over, you can go back to your room or your tent and meditate some more. You're really fortunate, and not just while you're here at the monastery. If you have to go back home and there's less time, you can still make some time in the course of the day to work on the meditation directly, and you can apply the lessons you've learned from the meditation in daily life.

You've heard the story related to Ajaan Chah, Ajaan Fuang, and Ajaan Lee: People would come and say to them, "I don't have time to meditate," and their response was always, "Do you have time to breathe?" "Well, yes." "Okay, you've got the basis there for learning how to develop good qualities around that time you have to breathe."

This is what it means to be a meditator. You make the most of the opportunities you've got wherever they are. And as you keep looking for these opportunities, you find them in many places where you didn't expect them.