

No Foolproofing

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The New York Times recently carried an article about the fact that most people in Thailand were getting less and less interested in Buddhism. One of the monks interviewed was quoted saying that, given the way everybody likes instant noodles, instant coffee, instant whatever, what we need is an instant Buddhism to get people back into the fold.

Of course, that's the problem. Everybody wants instant Buddhism: a few short, easy slogans you can hold in mind and something you can apply to your practice without thinking. In other words, we want a foolproof method. But the problem with a foolproof method is that you can master a foolproof method and still be a fool. What the Buddha's offering instead is a method that's going to force you to develop your discernment.

After all, the mind is very subtle. There are *lots* of things going on in the mind. There are lots of issues you're going to have to deal with as you bring the mind to concentration. In the beginning, you don't want to think about those issues too much; you want to focus on the breath. But you'll find that some issues are going to keep coming in, and you've got to learn how to deal with them. So it's good to have a sense of what some of those issues are going to be and how the instructions will change depending on the state of your mind.

The first issue, of course, is the balance between focusing too heavily or too lightly. The Buddha compared it to holding a quail in your hands. If you hold it too loosely, the quail's going to fly away; if you hold it too tightly, it's going to die. So how much pressure do you apply to the breath right now so that it's just right? You stay with the breath, but you're not clamping down on it. You try to stay with it smoothly. Try to make the breath like silk: smooth all the way in, smooth all the way out. That requires a certain steadiness of focus, and the question will come up: What's next? This is what's

next: the next breath. And you do the same thing there, the same thing with the next one, and the next one.

But then you find other issues coming in. Are you feeling too sluggish or too scattered? Is your energy level too low or too high? You have to adjust your energy level as well. The Buddha encourages you to analyze what's going on when the mind is getting sluggish. Ask yourself: What here is skillful right now, and what's unskillful? The fact that you're taking a proactive approach to asking those questions—and trying to answer them—should help stir up the juices a bit, get you interested in what's going on. This sluggishness: How do you feel it? Where do you feel it? Sometimes you notice there are a few stray sensations in the body that you very quickly label as signs that you're tired. But do you have to believe that label? Maybe there's another part of your awareness that's not really tired at all. Try to depend on that to figure out what to do next.

This is where things get complex again. When the Buddha taught suffering, he taught four noble truths. There wasn't just one truth. And the reason he chose four was because there are four duties you have to follow as a meditator. Any stress or suffering in the mind is something you want to comprehend until you can figure out what's causing it. When you see the cause, then you try to abandon it. Then there are other things that come up in the practice that are parts of the path; those are things you want to develop so that you can realize the cessation of suffering. So those are four different activities right there. And the development of discernment—of appropriate attention—is to figure out which of those duties you need to follow right now and with regard to which events in the mind.

There's a translation of a Dhamma talk by Ajahn Chah in which the original translation said that when you're focusing on the breath, any thoughts that come up, you want to let go. And the Thai transcription of the talk was actually skewed to follow the English version. But we found out that when you actually listened to the talk, he was saying, "If thoughts come up, if they're directed to the breath and they're helpful in evaluating the breath, think them,"

because that gets you even more firmly involved with the breath—which means that some thoughts are thoughts to be abandoned, and some thoughts are thoughts to be developed as part of the path. You've got to learn how to exercise your discernment here to figure out which is which, and then carry through with whatever the appropriate task is.

If you see that something is unskillful, you try to keep it from arising. If it has arisen, you try to abandon it. That's what you do with the cause of suffering. As for the path, if it hasn't arisen yet, you figure out which parts need to be developed and you work on those. When the parts are developed, you try to maintain them. Developing and maintaining are two different things, like the difference between getting on your bicycle—getting up and getting started—and then maintaining your balance as you ride along. It's a different set of skills.

So these are things you have to keep in mind as you simply try to figure out what qualifies as right effort right now. You'll know that the effort is right when it gives rise to a sense of rapture, a sense of fullness inside—refreshed, energized.

So those are the qualities you want to develop when you feel sense that your mind is too sluggish.

If your energy is too scattered, you want to develop more the qualities of serenity, concentration, equanimity.

The one thing the Buddha has you develop at all times is mindfulness. But mindfulness is not simply awareness of the present moment. It means keeping in mind what you need to know. So mindfulness is not simple. You have to keep these instructions in mind. It doesn't mean that you keep repeating them to yourself all the time, but it *does* mean you want to have them in the back of the mind to direct your attention as you're trying to stay with the breath and you see that your balance isn't too good. You're falling off the bike to the left, or you're falling off to the right. How do you get back on and get back into balance?

Notice that balance is not a static thing. If you ever watched a person walking across a tightrope, there's a fair

amount of back and forth, back and forth. But the real skill there is that when you sense you're going a little bit too far to the right, you know how to correct for it. If you're going too far to the left, you know how to correct for it. That's when you *really* exercise your discernment.

So although you have to bring some discernment to the path to begin with, the path requires that you exercise it and develop it. That means taking responsibility for looking after your state of concentration and figuring out: Is it something that needs to be given a little more energy? Are there things coming in that you have to abandon, to make sure you don't go running off after them? Is your energy level beginning to fade? How do you bring it back up? And when things are going well, how do you simply maintain them?

Even when you do get a good, well-balanced state of concentration, how long do you maintain it, just as it is, before you start asking questions about it? Because you find as you practice, the issue is not so much what level of concentration you've reached; the issue is what do you *do* with what concentration you have. As it turns out, the instructions are always basically the same, just that they get more subtle. The basic instruction is learn how to maintain your concentration in as many different situations as you can. As it gets more and more solid, then you can start asking: To what extent is there still some instability in this? Is there any rise or fall in the level of stress? And for that, you have to be very quiet, but very alert.

Luang Puu Khamdee, one of the great Thai ajaans, said you have to be like a hunter. You go to the spot where you know the animals that you want tend to go. But you can't know for sure when they're going to come. You can't make an appointment. You get there, and you have to be very still, but very alert—still, so that you don't scare the animals off; very alert, so that you can sense the slightest sounds they might make.

It's the same with your concentration. You try to make it as still as possible and then be alert to any unstillness so that things get more and more solid. You don't throw the

concentration away so you can move on to *vipassana*. The clear seeing, which is what genuine *vipassana* is all about, comes from trying to be very, very skilled in keeping the mind still and developing more sensitivity to how it may become even *more* still. What little things are you still doing that are knocking it off balance?

The answers to these questions again fall under the duties of the four noble truths. What are the things that you want to comprehend? What are the things you want to abandon? What are the things you need to develop, and what are the things you simply want to realize?

So there's no one-size-fits-all set of instructions. And given the fact that the mind is so complex, it's very doubtful that one set of basic instructions of what to do all the time throughout the meditation would actually work. Instructions of that sort would be like the cannons that the British set into concrete in Singapore before World War II. They thought the Japanese were going to come from the sea, so they pointed the cannons out to the sea and set them in concrete. But it turned out that the Japanese came by land, down the Malay peninsula. The cannons were useless.

In other words, your defilements, once they see you doing one thing all the time, will find some other angle to attack you from. You want to be all-around in how you look after your concentration and how you understand what might need to be done, because lots of things can come up. The fact that the Buddha boiled things down to four noble truths: That's quite a huge simplification right there. But simply knowing which of the four truths applies to which of your thoughts—which mental events—that requires discernment. And you have to be willing to make mistakes, notice when you've made a mistake, learn from it, and figure out how not to make that same mistake again.

That's the kind of practical discernment you're after here. The broader your comprehension of what's going on, and the broader your sense of the tools you have at your disposal, the more precisely you'll be able to stay on course.