

Meditation as a Skill

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The Buddha compares a skilled meditator to a skilled cook. The cook knows how to observe his master, in this case a king. He places many different kinds of food in front of the king and then notices: What kind of food does the king reach for? What kind of food does he praise? What does he eat a lot of? Then the next day, the cook will provide more of that kind of food without having to be told to.

In the same way, as a meditator, you have to learn how to observe your mind. How does the mind like to settle down? When it does settle down, what's the breath like? Where are you settled? And what is the quality of your awareness? Each time you meditate, at the end of the meditation, ask yourself these questions. At what point was the meditation especially good? Try to notice those different features. Then see if you can recreate them the next day, the next time you meditate. Of course, there's more to that analogy. After all, kings can be fickle. They can like one thing today and not like it the next day, which is why the cook has to prepare several different kinds of dishes as a backup. Be prepared for the fact that this king of your mind will have different moods.

This also has to do with the needs of the body. Some days the body needs long breathing. Some days it needs deep breathing. Some days it needs short breathing. So learn how to be sensitive: What does the body need now? At the same time, you have to remember all your other skills. Say that the king likes banana curry today. Tomorrow you don't just place bananas and curry powder on the table. You go back and do a really good job of fixing the curry.

In the same way, as you come to meditate, remember a lot of it has to do with the attitude of the mind, the qualities of mind you bring to this. This is one of the reasons why Ajaan Suwat would say, "Make sure your mood is right. Make sure your attitude is right as you're beginning to sit down to meditate." Here's where it's good to think about the bases of success, that list of dhammas that the Buddha said was among his most important teachings. It's given short shrift here in the West because there is that attitude: "There's no such thing as a good or bad meditation. There's just being in the present whatever comes up." Sometimes you hear that there's nothing to attain. Just realize what's present.

So why do you need all those bases for success? Well, the Buddha never taught any teachings that were superfluous. And he did talk about meditation as an attainment, as a skill that you master.

You are bringing the mind to states of becoming in the concentration and you want to think about the elements that go into that. The first, of course, is desire. All states of becoming are based on desire. Your concentration is going to be based on desire, too. But as the Buddha said, you have to fine-tune your desire. You have to balance it with patience. Patience doesn't mean just sitting there doing nothing, waiting for things to happen on their own. You encourage them, but you realize that certain things have their own rhythm, have their own pace.

The image they give in Thailand is of being a rice farmer. When you plant the rice, you have to be patient, which means you know it's going to take time. When the rice sprouts come an inch or two above the ground, you don't tell yourself, "They should be a couple feet off the ground," and then pull them up to make them that height. If you do that, you uproot them, and that's the end of the plant. You accept the fact that they're going to be small plants for a while.

But that doesn't mean you just leave them. You nurture them. Make sure they have enough water, enough fertilizer. Make sure there are no ants or mice coming into the field to eat the plants. The same way with your meditation: You want it to be going well. And you have some ideas about what will go well from your past meditations. But you realize it's going to take a little time for the mind to settle down, so you protect the meditation.

You're very careful not to let the mind wander off and take up with other desires. You do what you can to help nurture a state of mind that's willing to settle down, because sometimes even with the best breath and the best focus, the mind is going to be resistant. So you have to figure out what's going on inside the mind. Get it in the right mood.

This comes under not only desire, but also persistence. You just stick with it. Here again, you have to know how much energy to put in: how much is too much, how much is too little, how strong your focus should be, how weak it should be. Tune it so it's just right.

This relates to the third basis for success, which is intentness. You want to be fully intent on what you're doing, but without putting too much pressure on it. Think of those hunters and trackers who go through the forest. They want to keep their eyes out for any signs of animals, so they have to develop what's called scatter vision, where you're fully intent on being aware of your entire visual range. You're not focused on any one point to the exclusion of others. You're intent on the whole range. This is the quality of concentration you want to bring. You're centered, but there's a softness around the edge of the center, so that when you're focused on something, you're focused on it relaxing it and allowing the breath sensations to spread. Allow the blood to flow throughout the body. But you're

fully aware of the whole body. You're fully aware of the whole mind, intently here but in a broad, expansive way.

Then as your powers of discrimination, analysis, ingenuity—everything that comes under that fourth basis of success, *vimamsa*. You do come with some preconceived notions about what's going to work, but then you also notice: Is it working? Is it not? If it's not, what are you going to do? This is why I said it's good to have some backups, and to have in mind the fact that the mind will have different needs on different days. The body will have different needs on different days. So how do you accommodate for them?

You do your thinking. But again, it's balanced. It's not thinking that goes away from what you're doing. You use your powers of imagination and ingenuity, again not to create what they call "castles in Spain," but to figure out what else you might try. If it turns out the king doesn't like banana curry the second day, or doesn't like the same banana curry, what are you going to do to change the curry to make it more interesting? What other backup dishes do you have?

And try to bring a matter-of-fact attitude to this. When things do go well, try to simply note, "Okay, they're going well." Just maintain a sense of being balanced right there. If you try to grab on to that nice mind state and ruin it, ask yourself, "When you grabbed on, what went through your mind? Also, what sensations went through the body, got established in the body? Can you release those, reset, and get back to where you were?"

If you're going to use your powers of analysis, you have to have a very matter-of-fact attitude. When things are not going well, treat them matter-of-factly. When things are going well, you treat them matter-of-factly. That way your analysis is clear. And it's in this way that you get more and more clear about what's going on in the mind as you're creating this state of becoming. Of all the states of becoming, this is the easiest one to notice, to analyze, so that you can understand what it means to go into a state of becoming.

Ajaan Lee has a nice way of explaining it. He says it's like a path you walk back and forth across day after day after day. If people are not observant as they keep walking back and forth, back and forth, their minds will wander, and they won't notice anything. But those who are more observant begin to notice the different plants growing on the side of the path that were not there the day before. What about that line down there further in the path? Is that a little trench? Is it a snake? What's going on?

In other words, the fact that you're going over the same territory again and again should allow you to see the subtleties. And it's in seeing the subtleties that you become more observant, and you begin to see that even in a good state of

concentration there are certain things that can be improved. This is how it becomes a skill.

You're beginning to read it in terms of the three perceptions. You begin to see there's a certain inconstancy there. There's a certain level of stress. There are things you've got to let go of. This is how one of the three qualities you bring to the practice of mindfulness and concentration—i.e., alertness—gets developed. As Ajaan Lee says, ultimately mindfulness becomes knowledge. Your alertness becomes vision. We're headed towards knowledge and vision of things as they've come to be, the processes that go into becoming.

This is how it's done. It's done through mastering concentration as a skill, and bringing the full range of your powers of observation to be aware of the body all around, the mind all around. That's how you become a really good cook. You're observant and you have a whole range of skills that you can draw on. You begin to realize there really is such a thing as a really good meditation. Sometimes it may not start out so well, but the fact that you're willing to learn and observe: That's what makes the meditation good.