

At Play

November 6, 2021

Ajaan Lee has a lot of Dhamma talks where he portrays the practice as a development of skills, and he makes a lot of analogies with manual skills: sewing a pair of pants, weaving a basket, making clay tiles. We can take those images in, adopt that approach, but sometimes we can get too grim about it.

We read books that say that to get really good at a particular topic, you have to devote 10,000 hours of practice time. So we very dutifully put in our 10,000 hours, as if a mere amount of time would be enough. If we get grim about it, we're missing an important part of concentration practice, which is that it has to be based on a sense of gladness—a sense of ease, finding enjoyment in being right here.

Remember the stages in focusing on the mind: First you're sensitive to the state of your mind and then you gladden it. You can gladden it by thinking about the good you've done in the past; about how fortunate you are to be here, having this opportunity to work directly on your mind. But more immediately, gladness has to come with a sense that you enjoy doing this. So, get rid of the grim attitude. Remind yourself that a large part of learning a skill is learning how to play with it.

There are some people, say, who want to get good at the guitar and so they hire an expert teacher. The expert teacher gives them exercises and demands x number of hours of practice every week. But then there are the kids who learn guitar by just getting a guitar, going into the bedroom, shutting the door, and playing around—trying out this, trying out that, using their ingenuity—and gradually they get a sense of what does and doesn't work. The fact that they're exploring on their own—that this is their time just to play—lends the process a lot of joy, even when things don't come out well.

I've been reading recently about a Norwegian physicist who did a lot of early work on electromagnetism. It was if he was playing with his toys. He had some disastrous results. One time he was going to show a new solenoid gun to a large group of people, to show them how safe it would be. He told them that they wouldn't hear anything except the sound of the bullet reaching the target. He turned the solenoid on, and a huge arc of electricity went waving through the room, scaring everybody. Everybody went running out, and he became famous in a way that he didn't expect—but he laughed it off. After all, electricity is something we're *still* exploring.

So, when you're sitting here, you've got the body; you've got your mind. You've got "name"—in the sense of mental events, simply on the level of being mental events; you've got form—the body in the sense of the four elements. Okay, play with those things. Play with the breath.

You read Ajaan Lee's instructions on how to play with the breath and you can follow them, but then you can also do them backwards. Where he says to have the breath go down, you can think of it going up, or vice versa. Or you can simply ask yourself, "What would be a fun way to breathe right now?" What would be a fun way to perceive or picture the breath to yourself? Try it out. See what you can do with it.

Remember the principle of comedy improv: Never say No to a new idea. Run with it. Explore it. It may turn out not to be a good idea, but you won't really know until you've explored it.

If you take this approach, the meditation becomes a process of discovery. It's *your* meditation, particularly when you play with the perceptions. You can ask yourself, "Where are you in the body?" That was one of Dogen's questions when he was teaching how to de-think thinking: "Is the body sitting in the mind or is the mind sitting in the body?"

Where is your mind in the body? We tend to think of our awareness as being focused in the head, but there's an awareness of the hand in the hand, of the foot in the foot, of the leg in the leg, and so on. Let them be there. Let them have a little bit of their own freedom. See if you can center your awareness there.

All of Ajaan Lee's instructions for the breath came from playing around. The question he would advise asking—"If something seems true, to what extent is its opposite true?" That's playing around with ideas.

The questions that Ajaan MahaBoowa asks about pain—"Is the pain the same thing as the body? Does it have an intention?" He was playing around with different questions to see what might help as he was sitting with pain, and the fact that he was playing around, again, made it an adventure—something fun to do.

So you've got your toys right here. In fact, that's an image that Ajaan Lee uses: four big dolls to play with, he says of the four elements. How do you play with earth? How do you play with water? How do you play with the fire element inside the body? How do you play with the breath? There are no shoulds there; that's what makes the exploration fun.

Now, you will find that sometimes you try something out and it doesn't work. I've had times when I've tried to work through some tightness in my spine and given myself a headache by forcing things too much. I chalk that up to experience. Ajaan Fuang had a lot of students who, as they would meditate, would start

getting large feelings of intense pressure in the chest. He would have them think of the pressure going out through the arms, out through the palms of the hands. Pressure in the head—think of it going out the eyes. If that doesn't work, get up, walk around for a bit, let things return to normal, and then get back to play.

Think of the meditation not as a chore or as a duty you have to do. It's your opportunity to play with name and form. And because it's dealing on this level, you get very close to understanding where your ignorance is. You also see the *potentials* of name and form: what you can do with them. That's how you develop knowledge—knowledge that you've explored on your own.

When Ajaan Fuang would teach, even though the book he would hand out to people mentioned the four jhanas and, actually, described them quite well—Ajaan Lee's *Keeping the Breath in Mind*, "Method 2"—still, he never talked about jhana. He would never tell his students which jhana they were in. When they would have a meditation where things seemed to settle down well, he would ask them, "How would *you* describe your breath? How would *you* describe the state of your mind?" He would have them take an interest in what they were directly experiencing without having to measure it against some standard on a chalkboard.

Now, he may have seen Ajaan Lee teaching other people. And, when Ajaan Lee was first teaching in Bangkok, he *had* to emphasize jhana because the party line there among the scholarly monks was that the age of jhana had passed; the age, of course, for nibbana had passed; monks should be helping in the government's schools. So Ajaan Lee had to prove that that was not true. One of his ways of doing it was by playing around.

There was an old woman whose job was cleaning the restrooms in the monastery where he was teaching. She would come and meditate with him during her free time, and she got so that she could read minds. The first thing she did was to read the minds of the monks in the monastery. She got really incensed by what she saw, and she went and told on them to the abbot: "Do you realize what this monk is thinking? What that monk is thinking?"

The abbot, knowing the monks, knew that she was probably right. He called the monks together and he said, "Okay, you guys have got to watch out. These people can read you inside and out." That put the fear of jhana into them.

Now, the drawback was that some of Ajaan Lee's students would start comparing their jhanas among themselves, and I even saw that a little bit among Ajaan Fuang's students. So, to avoid that, Ajaan Fuang would not talk in those terms. He'd simply have them note, "What were you doing? What did it feel like as a result?" Then he would let them out to play.

So, as you're sitting here meditating, think of yourself being at play—at play with the four elements of the body; at play with feelings, perceptions, thought constructs, consciousness, your awareness—on those basic, building-block terms. You begin to see even how not only are *your* perceptions somewhat arbitrary, but even the Buddha's perceptions are conventions.

You see this in some of the ajaans' teachings. The teachings on three characteristics or three perceptions—*inconstant, stressful, not-self*: Some of the ajaans will have you ask, "Well, what is constant? What is not stressful? What is under your control?"

Ajaan Chah talks about how dependently co-arisen phenomena are *inconstant, stressful, not-self*; but the process of dependent co-arising itself is constant. That doesn't change. Ajaan Lee would talk about how getting the mind into concentration fights against the three characteristics. He also would talk about how gaining insight means looking into, "What in the mind is constant in addition to what's *inconstant*? What's *easeful* in addition to what's *stressful*? What is under your control? What is not under your control?" Then you have to take all those insights and you have to let go of *them*, too.

So, the ajaans took the Buddha's teachings as a challenge: Can you prove him wrong? Even though they found that there were some things that had their constant aspect, even *they* had to be let go of, too, which was a good warning: Even when you see a truth that's true all the way through, you can't hold on to it. You have to take a playful attitude *there* as well. That way, you can let go with a light touch and not throw things away heedlessly.

So, when the meditation begins to get tedious, remind yourself: You're here to play. You've got a whole *hour* to be at play. Focus on having a good time, and you'll find that you gain knowledge painlessly. Even in the midst of physical pain, the mind can have a good time.