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THE ART OF MEDITATION

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I expect many of us have read some of the scientific articles around these days that extol the benefits of meditation. Research into the effects meditation practice has on the brain has produced evidence of considerable benefits. I've also come across articles disparaging and discouraging Buddhist meditation. Some people who have tried, but after a while given up, claim it can be unhelpful, dangerous and maybe even life-destroying. These claims are not necessarily by people who haven't tried hard, who have just, say, done one *Vipassanā* course in India before giving up — sometimes they're from people who have hammered away at meditation for years, but eventually become disillusioned.

I'm not really surprised by such results. As the Abbot of a monastery I naturally hear a lot about how people practise and the results. When we first come across these teachings, they present us not just with something to believe in, but something we can actually *do* about our consciousness, and this gives us a hope. So we enter into the experience of meditation with enthusiasm, confidence and energy. We throw ourselves into practice and maybe we get some results. What do we do next? Once we've had some experience, especially some sort of 'special' experience, it's easy to cling to the memory. If it was pleasant we may try to repeat it. If it wasn't pleasant we may still cling to the memory, afraid that it may be repeated.

Sometimes the way meditation is taught over-emphasises technique. And clinging to technique can lead to clinging to results. In the beginning we learn from the techniques. But the idea that that is all there is to meditation is regrettable. It took me a long time to realize that a technician's approach wasn't working for me. I eventually noticed how preoccupied I was with the 'form' of practice and that I was losing touch with the 'spirit'. The point of practice, the spirit, is to deepen in understanding and ease. Worrying about stages to pass and skills to accomplish was conditioning rigidity of heart and mind. If I took the attitude that something was wrong with me and these techniques would fix it, attention became exclusive and limiting. It fed into the gaining mind; the idea of never being good enough; always having to get somewhere.

How we pick up the techniques determines how we relate to experience. Over-emphasis on the forms can lead to more clinging, not less. In the West, with our strong wilful attitude to life, this can be particularly pronounced. Not everybody in the world views life as we do. In Asia people are generally more relaxed and trusting. In their cultures mystery, myth and faith still have relevance. In our culture we tend to distrust

everything; we're taught to doubt, to question. That does, of course, have benefits. It also has limitations. 'Myth' has become synonymous with 'false'. Rituals are for primitive people. We need to be careful that we don't bring our wilful manipulative tendencies into the most important aspect of our lives. Good health, warm relationships, money, food and shelter are all important, but when we die the most important thing will be the state of our consciousness. So the way we enter our inner exploration is most important, and we are not obliged to assume a technical approach to it.

I have found the contemplative life is better viewed as an artistic exercise. In the beginning we need to learn the skills involved in an art form, like playing a musical instrument. Inevitably, applying ourselves to these techniques can be boring; becoming adept calls for repetition. To play a violin we must learn how to move our fingers, how to hold the wrist. If we don't hold the instrument correctly, many beautiful possibilities are not available. Hours and hours of exercise are required to learn to play an instrument, use the medium of paint or handle a camera. But once we've internalized those techniques, once they've really become ours, we can let the spirit of the artist flow.

I suggest it's similar with meditation. If you are thinking that you are not artistic, perhaps consider in terms of being agile. One of Ajahn Chah's teachers used to advise: if obstructions appear high, duck under them; if they appear low, jump over them. Agility is essential. If we feel we must adhere solely to what a beloved teacher has taught us initially, we may not progress. We may find we lack the creativity to deal with the complex obstructions we will encounter. Unfailing respect and gratitude to those who helped us get started, yes; but also daring to go into the unknown with interest in discovering something new.

So perhaps the authors of these commentaries on the perils of meditation hadn't felt allowed to experiment in their practice. Maybe they felt practice was all about one single technique. But because a respected teacher or tradition tells us what we should be doing, that doesn't mean they truly know what's right for us. What's needed is to locate the in-between ground where we can respectfully listen to the teachings given by the tradition, at the same time listen to ourselves. The middle way: not grasping at our own ways of doing things, and not grasping at the teacher's way of doing things either; studying both.

Early on in practice I had some delightful experiences, concentrating on the breath and dropping into pleasant states. But did they really help me deal with the obstructions which I, this deluded, confused character, had to face? Only up to a point, and then they failed miserably. I suspect this happens to many people: they come to a point where they feel they're

banging their heads against a brick wall. I would like to encourage us all to listen more carefully to our own intuition. We attend to that which comes from outside: books, teachers, traditions; but let's also feel and listen to what comes from inside us. I am not advocating grasping the view that 'my' unique and amazing approach is absolutely *the* way, but let's not assume it's not relevant.

On my first meditation retreat the teacher taught *ānāpānasati*, mindfulness of breathing while sitting; also walking meditation. I remember how on the third day of this retreat, a wonderful experience, a sudden perception of inner peace, inner calm arose. There was just quietness, like nothing I'd experienced before. I was out in the countryside, walking up and down on a gravel road in a remote part of Australia called Nimbin. With this perception was an inner voice — the chatterbox who likes to have an opinion about everything — commenting, 'There's just awareness', or perhaps it was, 'There's just knowing.' Then a question rapidly followed, 'But who's aware?' At that point the mind dropped into a deeper, even lovelier place. I can't remember how I reported this to the teacher, but he didn't seem to appreciate it as a useful key for unlocking my practice. Indeed, it took a long time and a lot of struggle before I recognized it for what it was.

Conscious questioning as a form of meditation is nothing new. Lots of people use it as a way of directing their interest and travelling the inner journey. Asking the right question, your own question, is an important part of practice. There are times when concentrating on a meditation object is a pleasant, agreeable thing to do; but maybe we should see it like Ajahn Thate.[1] He used to tell monks that for them entering *samādhi* was like going on a holiday; he would encourage it. But going on holiday is going on holiday, it isn't work.

Some of the most interesting work I do is asking questions like, 'Who's aware?' It's pleasing to think about the architectural plans for developing the monastery, but the more valuable work is asking inner questions: 'Who?' 'Who's asking the question?' That's an extremely interesting question, if it's asked in the right way and not because I or somebody else told you to ask it.

The mind is longing to ask such questions. Many people see their mind as an enemy. All they want to do is make their mind shut up, so they concentrate, concentrate, concentrate, in pursuit of peace. It's true that quietening the mind and concentration are part of practice, but only part of it. There are other aspects as well. Maybe you can make your mind your friend. Your friend the mind might really want to share this journey with you and have interesting contributions to make.

There are traditions where teachers specifically encourage asking questions. Again, we need to take care that we don't turn this into another technique applied in a perfunctory manner. Asked in the right way, at the right time, in the right direction, our heart-question will begin to tease out the tangled threads of contracted egoity. Master Hsu Yun, the great Chinese Ch'an meditation master,[2] used the technique of asking 'Who?' called in Chinese *hua-tou*, the profound question practice. When Ajahn Fun, a disciple of Ajahn Mun, was caught up in fear in practice, he went to consult Ajahn Mun. Ajahn Mun didn't just say, 'Go and concentrate on your breath.' He asked Ajahn Fan, 'Who's afraid?'

Remember these 'pointings' to the way are not to be grasped. If they are clung to they will be deluded ego building itself yet another shelter. Don't grasp the idea of asking the question, 'Who?' It's not the mind itself that is the problem; what we need to deal with is the deluded ego, self-centredness. That's our issue; all our energy is being gobbled up by this construction. So how do we release that energy, how do we undo it? There's certainly a stage where learning to bring the mind to one-pointedness, to steadiness, is needed. That's one aspect of our training, but do we take it all the way? Not necessarily, not everybody. Some people may take that form of meditation nearly all the way; and I'm told that at the very last stage of practice, at just the right time, they ask some very subtle questions and the whole tangle unravels; they find the freedom they've been seeking. But that may not be the way for all of us. Indeed, I suspect it's not the way for many of us.

Let's consider that maybe our mind is not our enemy. Maybe we need not tell it to shut up all the time. Maybe we can make friends with it and listen to it. Christians say, 'Ask and ye shall be given.' When I was a Christian I used to ask all the time, but I didn't get the results I was looking for. Only years later did I meet a Christian monk who pointed out that it matters *how* you ask. If we're not asking from the right place we're not going to get the right answer.

If we are fortunate on our inner journey, we might discover our own personal question which succeeds in untangling us, but we need to be careful about the energy which drives our questioning. Our questions need to be accompanied by a humble recognition that we don't know. I have a clear recollection of my first year of meditation, when I was applying this questioning practice but using it like a sledgehammer attacking an enemy. That didn't work very well. It didn't help at all, actually – I became very sick. We need to ask our questions gently, respectfully, as if we were talking to the Buddha. How would we talk to the Buddha if we met him, if we asked him a question?

I also like to reflect on a question Ajahn Chah asked once. It's available as

part of the Introduction to *Seeing the Way*, Volume 2. Some young monks were talking with him about the Original Mind. He pointed out that if you make the Original Mind into something, that's not really the Original Mind. If there's anything there at all, just throw it out. You can call it the Original Mind if you want to, but the term, the concept, 'Original Mind,' is not what's being pointed to. What is really original is inherently pure; there's nothing you can say about it. If you do want to say something about it you have to use words, but don't get caught in the words. In the course of that conversation Ajahn Chah came out with, 'In *what* is all this arising and ceasing?' You can be watching arising and ceasing all the time, but *in what* is it all taking place? That is a powerful question. We can be doing the technique, observing arising and ceasing, but *where, in what* is it happening? It's happening in awareness, knowingness, or whatever we choose to call it.

Whatever word we use, of course that's not it. And therein lies another interesting element of practice. Maybe the effort you put into practice takes you in the direction you want to go, and you have a few moments of opening up to the experience of abiding as awareness; you see with a new perspective. But later on you no longer have direct access to the actual experience of abiding as awareness. What you have is the memory of it. You have to be careful not to grasp that memory; the memory is not awareness. Memory is activity, it is content of awareness. Awareness is like the context; all that arises and ceases is content, like specks of dust floating around in the empty space that is awareness.

We might use a technique in the hope that it take us back into that experience of abiding as awareness. We don't reject such a technique, it may help us, provided we don't totally believe in it. However there is always the risk that techniques become idols, just as Buddha images can become idols. Some Buddha images are beautiful and uplifting. The Buddha didn't encourage such images himself; he did recommend the Bodhi tree. Only when the Greeks arrived in Afghanistan and came across Buddhism did Buddha images appear, modelled on those of Greek gods. But though there weren't Buddha images around in the time of the Buddha, we do have them now, and they're there to remind us of the potential pointed to in the Buddha's teaching. The Buddha image in itself does not have much more than what we project onto it. However, it can be helpful to have a Buddha image to project onto, just as it can be helpful at times to have a mirror. While I was on retreat alone in Scotland some years ago, I felt something wrong with my eye. It itched painfully, and eventually I realized that I had a tick on my eyelid. In order to remove it, I had to hold my glasses in such a way that I could see the tick and remove it without harming my eye. Without a mirror I would have been in trouble.

So we can benefit from forms which reflect back to us. We can use Buddha images like that, or the wheel symbol, things that remind us of the Buddha and the potential for perfect wisdom and perfect compassion. The Buddha image itself, though, is not perfect wisdom and perfect compassion. I feel sorry for the Taliban who destroyed those gigantic Buddha images in Bamiyan, Afghanistan, but they weren't the Buddha. Likewise, a meditation technique is not the Dhamma; it is a form that helps us relate to the Dhamma. The concept of awareness is not the Buddha. We use concepts of awareness, or the model of space with specks of dust floating through it, as images to remind us of the work we need to do.

We are fortunate to have these tried and tested tools and techniques to apply in formal practice, and also techniques that help in daily-life practice, like the Five Precepts. 'I undertake the training to refrain from killing living beings'; those are words, form, that symbolize the spirit, which is to inhibit any intention to cause harm. The form is useful; it points to that spirit of harmlessness, something which matters to us. Without that form we might forget. So the Five Precepts are definitely a useful technique, a useful form.

Another technique aimed at bringing us back to mindfulness in the moment, I learned from the teacher Ruth Denison. It involves having people stand on one leg. I have used it when talking on the telephone to someone who is disoriented - tears, grief, confusion: 'OK, come on, let's both get up and stand on one leg.' Maybe they think I'm kidding: 'I'm serious. We'll talk about your problem, but right now, let's stand on one leg. If you want to talk to me we've got to be standing on one leg first.' So there you are in the middle of the room, with your telephone at one ear, standing on one leg. That's a very useful exercise, as to do it you have to come back into the body. After standing on one leg for a while you tend to be drawn back into the head, but then you'll wobble, and when you're about to fall over you'll have to come back very quickly into the body again. They might say, 'But I can't think about my problem while I'm standing on one leg!' I could reply, 'Well, that's good, because that's why you rang me up, because you can't stop thinking about your problem.' I'm not being flippant when I talk to someone like this; this exercise is useful if you find yourself lost. And of course I'm not talking here about grasping the technique and becoming one of those Indian ascetics who stand all day on one leg. They've missed the point.

There are so many techniques to aid mindfulness. Ajahn Chah wouldn't allow electricity in the monastery for many years because he wanted us to pull water from the well by hand. He thought that was a good way of embodying mindfulness practice. I was telling the monks the other day of

a Zen monastery where the abbot wouldn't allow a washing machine, because he or she thought the monks and nuns would become lazy. Eventually the monastery did acquire a washing machine, so the abbot said, 'OK, when you put your clothes in the washing machine you must sit and watch the washing go round and round in a circle. You may not just push the button and go away and get heedless again, you've got to sit there.'

Ajahn Chah banned cigarette smoking at his monastery, but when I first ordained I lived in a monastery in Bangkok where it was allowed. The rule was that you weren't allowed to smoke unless you were sitting down, so if you were going to smoke you had to smoke fully. Of course, I'm not advocating that particular practice. But the message being conveyed, the spirit encoded in the form, was to do what you're doing fully. If you're writing an email, fully write the email. Often when we are sitting at a computer we are lost. We forget the body and become stressed. We're not really doing what we're doing. We are not 'all there'. Yet we've heard many teachers say over and over that the practice of mindfulness is here and now. The Buddha said, 'The past is dead, the future's not yet born.' The only reality we have access to is this reality, here, now. We need techniques; we need forms to help bring ourselves back to this moment. But the spirit is awareness. The form is the techniques which help us realize that quality of awareness.

So if your use of meditation techniques nourishes your faith and deepens your confidence, do continue. If the artist's approach appeals to you, if you have a slightly creative, wild, deviant impulse to meditate in a different way, don't necessarily be afraid of it. It might be your mind coming to help you on this inner journey.

Thank you very much this evening for your attention.

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1 Ajahn Thate (1902-1994) was one of the most influential Thai Forest Tradition monks of the last century. The author spent some time practising with him. ↩

2 Master Hsu Yun lived until 1959. He survived torture and persecution by the Chinese Communists, and was instrumental in ensuring the survival of Buddhism in Communist China. He is one of the most influential Chinese Buddhists of the last two centuries. ↩

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