

Cooking the Mind

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One of the more unusual images that the ajaans use for describing the practice is that you're cooking your mind. It's like cooking rice. Uncooked rice can still grow and turn into rice plants. If your mind is thoroughly cooked, though, it's not going to give rise to any more rice plants. It's not going to be reborn again. It's not going to have the craving that would lead to more becoming.

So you're cooking your cravings. As with all cooking, some of the main principles are the same for everybody. You're applying heat. That's the effort; but some people are like eggs. Some people are like vegetables. Other people are like meat. They cook at different temperatures. And the way they change as they go through the cooking will have different stages for each. This is why it's important not to have too many set ideas about how the path is going to go for you.

You read of an ajaan whose mind was like brussel sprouts, but your mind is like fish. If you try to cook the fish the same way you cook brussel sprouts, it doesn't quite work. So when you read about the ajaans, about people who've been practicing the path and how they've gotten results, remember Ajaan MahaBoowa's warning to read these things in order to gain confidence that human beings can do this, but don't try too hard to mold your mind so you get the same results and go through the same stages they do. Instead, you focus on applying the heat right now and see how the mind responds as you cook it.

The heat is the heat of your effort. Ajaan Lee has a nice image. He says it's like putting a hunk of rock into a smelter. You apply the heat and the metals you want to get out of the rock will come out when you've reached their melting point: first tin, then lead, zinc, silver, and then gold. If you try to go in with a pick and try, say, to get the gold flakes out of the rock, or the little bits of tin or the little bits of silver, it's not going to work. But if you've applied the heat properly, then when you've reached the melting point for tin, here comes the tin. When you reach the melting point for gold, the gold comes out.

So you focus on the causes. And then don't try too hard to squeeze things in the direction where you think they have to go. Because with concentration, the way you relate to your breath is going to be different from the way anybody else relates to his or her breath.

You read about all these wonderful stages that people get into the concentration and you look at yours and it doesn't seem all that wonderful, so you toss it away—which is a mistake. You've got to work with what you've got. If your concentration is just nice, then maintain nice concentration. If it's just okay, maintain okay. The whole point about concentration is that you maintain it. Only if it's maintained does it begin to develop as it goes through its various stages.

So if the mind is with the breath, that's good enough. Just keep it there. And then over time, you begin to have a sense that "I'm putting too much pressure on it." Okay, lessen the pressure a little bit. "My focus is too narrow." Okay, widen it up a little bit. And then sit with that for a while. See what kind of results you're getting. You may decide that you've made a mistake. Well, just go back to where you were before. Try not to get yourself tied up in knots about how long this is taking or what kind of a meditator you are. Let there be just awareness and the breath. Try to keep it at that level. And then begin to get a sense of how it feels over time.

Ajaan Phut gave a Dhamma talk that I listened to one time: He told us what it was like to stay with Ajaan Sao. When Ajaan Sao would give meditation instructions, people would ask, "When I follow your instructions, what should I expect?" And he said, "Just follow the instructions." Because if you focus on what you expect, you're not going to be following the instructions. You're going to be focusing on the expectations. Results don't come from expectations. They come from very ordinary things—being aware of the breath; trying to be aware of the breath as continually as you can—though Ajaan Sao didn't add even those explanations. If people asked, "What should I expect?" he'd just say, "Don't ask. Just do it."

In a lot of ways, Ajaan Fuang was the same sort of teacher. "This is the next step," he'd say, and then you just did the next step. Then if something seemed to be happening in your mind, and if it happened twice, then you could talk to him about it. It was interesting. If it happened just once, he wasn't interested. He didn't want to hear about flukes. But if something happened twice, that was a sign that you were beginning to get someplace. And then you could report it. Then he'd either say to change what you're doing, or to keep on doing what you're doing. There was no clear idea of where this was all supposed to go, aside from the fact that you just kept at the causes. If your mind felt dull, okay, that was a sign you weren't doing it quite right, so you'd make changes yourself.

If you went and complained to him with every little problem, he'd chase you away. He'd ask you to try to give the matter some thought first: "What do *you* think you're doing wrong? What do you think might work?" If you tried to come up with a solution on your own and then ran that past him, he'd be willing to talk about that. In other words, you had to take some responsibility for your own practice. And you might say, "How can I do that? I don't know what I'm doing." Well, look at what you're doing. As for what you're supposed to be doing, put that aside for the time being. Just ask, what are you doing right now? What do you think would work to get the mind to settle down? You try some of the things you've learned, that you've heard about or you've read in books. But when you try it, you really try it. In other words, give it some time. We are creating a state of concentration here, but we're doing it in the dark, and we have to expect some groping around. Fortunately, though, it's not totally creation. You're tuning into things that are already there and just letting them develop as you stay steadily with them.

So, it's not out of whole cloth. You tune into the way the breath feels in the body—this dimension of your awareness, which is already there. It's just that you learn how to stay there. And as the mind is allowed to stay, it'll start developing in different ways. A sense of rapture may come, and "rapture" here can be all kinds of different things. When you hear the word "rapture," you think of Saint Teresa going into her ecstasies. That image could get in the way of your practice, because for some people, rapture is just a sense of refreshment; ease; a sense of fullness. All the blood vessels in the body seem to be nicely full, and nothing is tense. For other people, though, it *is* more intense. But you don't know beforehand what your rapture is going to be like. In some cases, once you finally realize, "Oh, this is what he's talking about," it wasn't quite what you thought ahead of time.

That's another one of the reasons why you don't want to have things mapped out too much in advance, because the map is going to correspond to your preconceived notions. It's like going to a foreign city. You can read about it in guidebooks and paint a picture in your head about what it's going to be like. But when you actually get there, it's going to be something else. Now if you're holding on too closely to those pictures, you'll say, "This can't be that city. I imagined it some other way. It must be some other city someplace else. That's the real city. This is the wrong city." Now when travelling to a foreign city, that's obviously pretty dumb. But that's the way a lot of us approach the concentration. We think it's got to be this way, it's got to be that way, and we have these set ideas in our heads. Nothing seems to quite match them, so you never find concentration because it doesn't correspond to the way you imagined it out of the books.

But if you just do the instructions, you find that after a while, your mind is settling down. At first, it doesn't seem anything remarkable yet, but at least it's staying here. Okay, maintain that. That's how things begin. When the books talk about the different stages of concentration—momentary concentration, and then access concentration and then finally fixed penetration—you have to remember that they're not radically different things. It's just that the momentary concentration gets stitched together so it begins to get deeper and deeper and deeper. Fixed penetration comes from momentary concentration. So don't throw away the concentration you've got. Learn how to nurture it. Learn how to protect it. And then when you start hitting right concentration, you'll probably hit it before you realize it. But you begin to notice: The mind seems more solid, more settled. When you come out of the concentration, you feel refreshed. Okay, that's a good sign. You have to learn by feeling your way. And the advantage of this is that you're paying very close attention to what you're doing right here and you're not constantly comparing it to some idea you picked up someplace else. That's how your discernment grows.

There was a Zen master, Dogen, who had an interesting point. He said that the development of the path is no different from the realization of cessation. That doesn't mean that the path and the goal are the same thing. What it means is that the activity of developing

the path, if you pay careful attention to what you're doing, is where you'll find cessation. You don't have to look anywhere else, which is why some of the ajaans say that the breath itself is the path. Whatever your concentration object is, that's your path. That's what you follow. And if the mind is allowed to follow it consistently enough, it's going to start going through the changes it has to go through.

So feel your way into the concentration, and try to be like a person who can't see, but has very sensitive fingers. The more you depend on your fingers, the more you realize that they can pick up things you wouldn't have known otherwise, but that you sense through the fingers. And that way, you arrive at something real, not something that you jerry-rigged together beforehand in your mind. To go back to the original analogy, you're keeping the heat at just the right level and you're stirring when you have to stir and you're turning things over when you have to turn them over—and that way your mind gets thoroughly cooked.