

Playing the Lute

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The Buddha once compared meditation to playing a musical instrument. Part of the analogy is famous. The story is this: Sona, who had been very delicately brought up, had become a monk. He was doing a lot of walking meditation. His feet were so tender that they started to bleed. He got discouraged. He had put a lot of effort into the practice, and yet he was not getting anywhere. He starts thinking of disrobing. The Buddha reads his mind, and so he levitates from Vulture Peak, appears right in front of Sona, and asks him, "Back when you were a lay person, were you good at playing the lute? And Sona says, Yes. The Buddha asks, "What was it like when the strings were too tight? Did it sound good?" Well, no. "How about when they were too loose?" That didn't sound good either. "So," the Buddha says, "in the same way you tune your persistence, you tune your level of energy, so that it's just right.

That's the famous part of the image. There is an aspect to right effort in which the amount of effort is important. If you wear yourself out, push yourself beyond your limits, it can have negative consequences. At same time, if you don't push yourself hard enough, you don't get anywhere. So you have to test: Exactly what level of energy are you capable of putting into the practice?

But there's more to the image than just that, because you're not tuning just your level of energy. As the Buddha says, once you've tuned your level of energy, you tune the other strings to the first one. The other strings are the other four of the five faculties: conviction, mindfulness, concentration, and discernment. You want all of these to be in tune, too. Then, as the Buddha says, you pick up your theme. Now picking up your theme is actually the most difficult and interesting part of the process of playing an instrument, because Indian classical music back in those days, as in these days, was more like jazz than it was like Western classical music. You were simply given a theme and then you did all kinds of things with that theme. You turned it inside out, you stretched it, you compressed it, you played around with it.

Just like jazz, that requires a combination of strong discipline and creativity. The discipline is in learning how to look at what you're doing and to evaluate what you doing, having a clear sense of what's working and what's not. The creativity is the other side of the equation. Ajaan Lee gives a lot of advice in this area. He says that when you work with the breath, figure out what you enjoy doing with the breath, what kind of sensations feel good, what way of working with the breath gets you interested, captures your imagination. You keep trying new things, and then you evaluate them. This is where the discipline comes in: what's working and what's not.

This can apply both to the physical side and to the mental side. Sometimes working for a very comfortable breath gets counterproductive. Things start getting very uncomfortable, and you start getting frustrated. So you have to step back and ask yourself, what's going wrong here? Not everything you try is going to work, and so you need the discipline and equanimity to admit that. When the Buddha teaches patience and equanimity, he's not teaching the patience of a victim. He's teaching the patience of an artist, someone who's willing to try all kinds of things, and then admit very frankly what's working and what's not.

So keep this principle in mind as you practice. You've got five faculties that you're working with all at once, and you want to keep them all in tune. Given the amount of energy you can

put into the practice, how does conviction fit in with that? How does mindfulness fit in with that? Say that you're sick. What are the good things to be mindful of while you are sick? Or when your level of energy is really strong, what's a good way of being mindful? What you need to do in order to get the mind concentrated when your energy is strong in that way? Because it's very easy for the mind to just run away with its energy.

Sometimes this means really forcing the mind to be one pointed, staying right here and not wandering off anywhere else. No matter how hard the winds are blowing, how strong the storms of the mind, you're going to stay right here, regardless. Other times, you can harness that energy. If the mind wants to think, okay let it think. Go through the parts of the body, analyze the breath all the way down to your fingers and toes, each finger, each toe. How is the energy in your fingers during the in-breath? How is the energy during the out-breath? Where do you feel tension in your fingers and toes? Can you relax it? What happens when you do? In other words, give the mind something to explore. Then use your discernment to see what's working and what's not.

Insight is not just a matter of seeing things arising and passing away, but seeing that there's pattern to their arising and passing away. So you have to look for connections, and to see connections, you have to experiment. This is how scientists find out what's causing what in the universe: by experimenting. Sometimes you see some Buddhist meditation methods taught as being very scientific, but they're very much a rote kind of grade school science. You simply memorize the rules and follow the rules. But that's not how science develops, that's not how scientists gain new knowledge. They experiment. As Kurt Vonnegut once said, scientists are basically grown-up kids. They like to play. But there's a discipline to their playing around—just as a jazz musician has to have really strong discipline in the sense of having a good ear, being able listen, being able to evaluate, so that there's a shape to his improvisation, that it expresses something that's worth listening to.

So to look for cause and effect, you have to try new things, new ways of breathing, new ways of perceiving the breath, new ways of looking at where you're focused, how you are focused, what's doing the focusing, what's doing the breathing. Try out some questions and see what works and what doesn't. That insight of stream enterers—that all that's subject to origination is subject to passing away—is not saying that these things simply arise and pass away. The word *origination* here has to do with causality: Things that are caused are subject to passing away. So you want to see the causes. Experiment to see whether A is causing B, or B is causing A, or if they're not related at all.

This way you get a sense of how the mind and the body interact, as you play around with the *rupa*, or form—in this case the breath—and how the breath energy relates to the other properties of the body. There's also feeling: pleasure or pain, neither pleasure nor pain; and there's the perception of how you perceive the process of breathing, where you think the breath is coming in the body. You can play with those perceptions, you know. You can think of the breath coming in and out through every pore in the body. You can think of the breath coming in and out the palms of your hands or the soles of your feet. If there seems to be a blockage in your body, that you are having trouble breath pulling the breath in, well, don't think of pulling the breath in. Think of the breath coming in through the back, flooding the body, say, from the base of your skull, or from that point in your back. We all have a point down the spine, just like dogs have their point. If you go down the spine of a dog, massaging it, you hit one point they just fall apart. Human beings have that point as well. Try to find yours, and see what happens

when you think of the breath coming in and out right there, effortlessly. That way, you're dealing with both the perception and with fabrication.

Of course, then there's your consciousness. Where are you conscious of things? Is it a one-pointed consciousness? Is it a many-pointed consciousness? Two-pointed? Sometimes if you have trouble staying focused on one point, think of being focused on two points at once, the middle of your head and the base of your skull; or both hands, or both shoulders, both knees.

In this way, you're experimenting with the five aggregates, and seeing the relationship of the process of fabricating here in present moment, to experience the five aggregates as an interactive whole. So you're not just fooling around. You're not simply indulging in your desire to play. You're learning about how these things interact. That kind of knowledge is the knowledge that leads to awakening.

So that last part of the analogy—the picking up your theme and playing—is the most important part. It's the most difficult part but it's why you tune the instrument to begin with. It's not just a matter of figuring out how much effort to put in, but how you apply all five faculties to understand the all of your experience. Because once you understand the process of causation, causality, you can start using it to your own advantage.

So tune your level of energy, then tune the other faculties to that level of energy, and pick up your theme, to see where your discipline and your powers of imagination can take you when you've got them working together.