

## *Expert's Mind*

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The main reason we meditate is so that we can see what we're doing. The mind is doing things all the time, and for the most part we're pretty oblivious to what it's doing. We fashion whole worlds in the mind, and instead of looking at the process of fashioning, we look at the worlds we've created, and we get lost in the worlds we've created. One world wears out, then we get lost in another world. You could say that one of the purposes of meditation is not to get lost. And the way to do that is to look, not at the world, but at the way it's fashioned.

This is one of the areas where the Buddha's teachings are really radical. When you compare them with the teachings offered at his time, you notice that a lot of them had to do with defining: What is a person? Who are you? What is your real self? That's on the one hand. On the other hand, the questions are: What is the world? Is it something eternal? Is it something not? Is it finite? Is it infinite?

In other words, the questions are about what things *are*. And the Buddha came along and said that those are all the wrong questions. The right question to ask is, what are you *doing*? In particular, what are you doing that's causing suffering? What could you do to stop that suffering?

All of his really basic teachings have to do with action, which is why kamma is so central to what he taught. Kamma consists of your intentions, and your intentions are shaped by your views. If your views are concerned with what you are or what the world is, you're going to be sloppy in your actions. But if your views deal with what are you doing, what kind of actions are skillful, what kind of actions are not skillful, they focus your attention where it really can make a difference—where it really can be of use. The rest of the path then follows on that. You make up your mind that you're going to act on intentions that are not harmful, and you apply that principle to your daily life in what you do, what you say, how you earn your livelihood. Then you've got to put the mind in a position where it really can read itself, where it can see what it's doing very clearly.

That's why we have the path factors of right effort, right mindfulness, and right concentration. In terms of right effort, you try to generate desire and stay firm in your intent to abandon what's unskillful and develop what's skillful. Then you try to keep that in mind. As you keep that in mind you find that the mind is ultimately able to settle down.

The Buddha talks about this in one of his discourses: that he actually got on the right path when he started dividing his thoughts into two types—those that

were harmful and those that weren't. He looked at his thoughts not in terms of their content, but in terms of what they did through a pattern of cause and effect. And he found that thoughts imbued with sensuality, with ill-will, or with violence and cruelty were harmful, and those that were devoid of these qualities were harmless.

So he made up his mind: Every time his mind started heading off into unskillful thought patterns, he would pull it back. Like a cowherd: You see the cows wandering off into the rice fields, so you beat them back, to keep them out of the rice.

When he noticed that his thoughts were going in harmless directions, though, he allowed them to wander at will, simply being aware that they were there, in case they might start getting into trouble again. But he found that even thinking harmless thoughts was burdensome to the mind. If you thought for 24 hours in harmless ways, you could wear your mind out. So he inclined his mind to concentration as an even more restful state that caused even less harm, less wear on himself and on other people.

At the same time, when the mind is concentrated you can see yourself really clearly, you see the actions of the mind very clearly, because you give yourself a good reference point. The reference points could be the body, feelings, mind states themselves, or individual mental qualities. But we start with the body. This is why we focus on the breath. Of the different aspects of the body, the breath is closest to the mind. It's most sensitive to the movements of the mind and it in turn exerts a positive or a negative influence on the mind. So it's a good part of the body to know.

Try to be aware of the whole body as you breathe in, so that you sense the whole process of breathing. Our focus is not simply on the air coming in and out of the lungs, but on the whole process of how the body maintains itself through breathing, and on how the different parts of the body are involved or not involved in the process of breathing. As you explore this area, you find that you're learning not only about the breath but also about the body as a whole—and also about the mind, because this is where the body and the mind all come together.

You're putting yourself in a really good place to observe the mind, and as you observe it you find that you can also train it in various directions so that its intentions and views become more and more skillful. After all, the way we cause suffering is through our intentions, while the path to the end of suffering is also a martialing of our intentions to direct them in the right direction.

So that's what we're doing here right now: learning to watch the mind as it acts. The mind in and of itself is something hard to observe straight on, but we get

to know it through its actions. We train it through training its actions.

This is why we depend on our tradition, so that we don't have to reinvent the Dhamma wheel every time we sit down. Left to our own devices, we might not be able to live to the point where we'd figured out what really is skillful and what's not. So we look at the skills that people of the past have worked on. We learn from their experience.

In some cases, we have to relearn things from within, but it's really useful to have pointers from the past to give us a leg-up. It's like learning a musical instrument; it really helps to know something about music theory, it helps to hear recordings of masters of the past, so that you can get an idea of which areas of action are fruitful to explore. If you simply imitate them, it becomes a rote process—which is a skill of one kind, but it's also possible to learn from the past and then develop it, to explore areas that are not explained in the text.

The Buddha seems to anticipate this point. In his meditation instructions he doesn't set everything out in a nice step-by-step form that even brainless people could follow. Instead, he plants suggestions in our minds, points out areas where it's fruitful to explore, and then leaves it up to our own ingenuity to continue the exploration. He wants to make us curious, so that we follow our curiosity. If meditation were simply a matter of following preset steps, it would get very dull—and very confining—very quickly. But it doesn't hurt that we have recommendations to where it's useful to look, what skills are useful to develop.

This is why the concept of Beginner's Mind is vastly overrated. They say that there are lots of potentials in the beginner's mind—but they're mostly potentials that aren't fulfilled, that aren't yet actualized. They say that an expert's mind has few possibilities, but that's the wrong kind of expert. It's a dumb expert: someone who's mastered a craft but hasn't developed it into an art. The master artist is one who's learned the craft but then keeps pushing the envelope. That's the sort of person who creates the great works of art, who can build on past experience and then push the envelope even further.

So what you're trying to develop here is an expert mind: a mind that's expert at reading its own actions, figuring out what's skillful and what's not. And concentration is a huge help in that direction. It helps put the mind in a place where it can really see clearly what's going on, so that when you hear about skillful behavior, it's not something you've simply heard in a Dhamma talk or read in a book. You've seen for yourself that this kind of behavior really does lead to a harmless sense of pleasure and well-being. And in exploring that issue for yourself, you gain a lot in terms of discernment as well. You're not simply memorizing what's in books, but then, at the same time, you're not just making

wild leaps without any sense of background or help from anybody else at all. It's learning how to use the lessons from the past and to apply them in a sensitive, ingenious way to the present moment: That's Expert's Mind.

An expert mind has lots of possibilities, and many of them can be actualized. Many of them *are* genuinely actualized.

So learn from the past and explore the present. That's how awakening is found.