

Learning from What You Do

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When you focus on the breath, start out by paying extra special attention to the places in the body where the breath is most obvious. That might be at the nose, but it might not be at the nose. It might be in the chest, the shoulders, the back, your abdomen—wherever you sense the breath most clearly, the sensations that tell you now the breath is coming in, now the breath is going out. Allow your attention to settle there. And allow the breath to be as comfortable as possible. Try not to squeeze it as you focus in on it. Let the breath have its freedom.

Of course, once you focus on the breath, it's going to become both an automatic process and not an automatic process. As soon as you bring attention to it, your intentions about the breath are going to get involved. So it becomes a really good laboratory for testing your intentions. Your first intention might be: What kind of breathing feels best right now? Should it be longer? Should it be shorter? Deeper? More shallow? Experiment. This is how you understand cause and effect: changing different causes and then seeing what happens as a result.

There's a teaching you hear sometimes that the Buddha taught us to be not attached to the results, not attached to the outcome of our actions. But the only way that idea makes sense is if there are some things totally beyond your power to change. That's what you have to let go of. But you're not going to know what those things until you try to bring things into line with your intentions. Any scientist knows this. If you want to see what's causing what, you have to change things around a little bit. Sometimes you change what you think might be a cause, but other things don't get changed at all, so you see there's no connection there. Other times you change something, and other things do change. Okay, there's a connection. You can explore that connection. But you wouldn't have known about it unless you had tested things, played with things.

And you do want to be concerned about results. This principle starts with the Buddha's very first teachings to his son, Rahula, when Rahula was seven years old. The Buddha told him, look at your actions as you would in a mirror. First look at your intentions, and if you see that your intention would cause you to do something that would lead to harm, don't follow it through. If you don't anticipate any harm, go ahead and do it. If you find that what you're doing, or saying, or thinking is leading to harmful results either for yourself or for other people, stop. If you don't see any harm, keep on with the action. Then when it's

done, consider the long-term results. If you see that you actually did cause harm, talk it over with someone else more experienced on the path, and resolve not to repeat that mistake. If it didn't cause harm, then take joy in the fact that you're on the path and continue training.

So you do have to be concerned about the results of your actions, because you want to learn from them. This principle starts with the way you deal with other people—the things you do, the things you say to them—and then it moves into the mind. This is what the four noble truths are all about. What kind of desires lead to suffering? What kind of desires are actually part of the path to the end of suffering? You're not going to find out unless you test them. Fortunately, you don't have to reinvent the Dhamma wheel every time you make a decision. The Buddha gives you some help by laying out the precepts. But there are a lot of subtle areas in the mind that you have to test for yourself. And you are concerned about outcome. You are concerned about results—because this is how you learn.

The model for judging here is not that of a judge on a bench trying to pass a verdict on an action that's been done, to give the final word on that action to allot punishment. That's not what we're concerned with. We're more concerned with learning from the action and adjusting things in midcourse. The pattern would be more of a carpenter sitting on his bench, working on a piece of furniture, judging how it's going, where things have to be planed, where they have to be sanded, and where things have to be thrown out to start all over again. The purpose of judging is not to pass a final verdict. It's to learn.

Or you can think of a pianist sitting on her bench as she's playing the piano, listening to herself play and figuring out where she has to make changes to make the music more effective, to make it more coherent. So you use your faculty of judgment here not to pass judgment in a final way, but to pass judgment in the sense of learning from what you're doing as you're doing it, so that you can grow in skill.

So we are concerned with the outcome of our actions to the extent that we can change them, to the extent that we can learn from them, so that we can become more and more skillful. As the Buddha once said, the most useful internal quality for awakening is appropriate attention. And appropriate attention means knowing which things to pay attention to and which things not to. Questions of: Do I exist? Do I not exist? Is the world eternal? Is the world not eternal? Those are things that are not worth paying attention to because they get you into a thicket of views where you get caught in the thorns and can't get out. The issues to pay attention to are issues of where there's stress or suffering, what's causing it, what can be done to bring it to an end. Then to see that it actually can come to an end.

And this is how you learn those issues, by looking at your actions and seeing what they lead to, the amount of stress or lack of stress that they cause.

The breath is a good place to test this out, because it is partly an automatic function, partly an intended function in the body. You start noticing how your intentions affect the breath by intentionally playing with it, experimenting with it, then learning to maximize the amount of pleasure that can come simply from having your mind focused on the present moment. Once there's a sense of ease in the spot that you've been focusing on, allow that sense of ease to spread through the body. Think of the breath as a whole-body process. And the pleasure that can come from the breath can be a whole-body process, too, a whole-body sensation.

So while you're working on the path, the desire to get this right is part of right effort. As the Buddha said, right effort involves generating the desire to let go of unskillful states that have arisen, to prevent unskillful states that haven't arisen from arising. And then generating the desire to give rise to skillful states and then maximize them once they're there. So you want to work on the concentration. This kind of desire is part of the path because it leads to good results. It's something to be developed.

Each of the four noble truths requires not only knowing about the truth but also developing a skill in how to handle that particular truth. Stress is something you want to comprehend. Its cause is something you want to abandon. You want to realize the cessation of stress and to develop the path. So you know the truth, you know the skill related to it, then you actually master the skill. That requires practice, because you're going to get it right and you're going to get it wrong. But you have to have the right attitude toward it so that even when you do get it wrong, you can learn from what you've done wrong, using your powers of judgment not to be negative but to be helpful: to be very clear about what you've been doing and the results of what you've done, so that you can learn from them.

So we are working on a skill here. And as with any skill, it partly depends on your own powers of observation and partly on finding other people who are skillful. As the Buddha said, when you get things wrong, it's good to talk them over with someone else who is on the path.

This is the other factor the Buddha extolled, the external factor that's most useful for awakening, which is admirable friendship: finding people who are exemplars, people whose virtue you admire, whose generosity you admire, whose conviction and discernment you admire. Try to learn from them, talking over these issues, emulating them in areas where they're worthy of emulation.

Because we do have our blind spots: That's what ignorance is all about. It's not an abstract thing. It's being ignorant of your own intentions, and ignorant of the

results of your actions: not understanding, say, when you're suffering, which part of the suffering comes from something that you can control and which part comes from things you can't control. The *dukkha* or suffering of the three characteristics is something that's built into things. But the *dukkha* or the suffering and stress that comes from craving—the *dukkha* of the four noble truths: That's something that doesn't have to be there. That's something you can change. And learning to see the distinction between these two forms of stress requires that you use your own powers of observation. At the same time, it's also helpful to hear this from other people to get their perspective.

In the training of the mind, you have to do the training, but it's useful to talk things over with someone who has been through the training so that that person can point out areas where you're blind to your own failings, to your own unskillful ideas. A lot of the things that need to be trained out of the mind are the things we believe very firmly in. So you need somebody else to point those areas out to you, that maybe you shouldn't believe in those things. Maybe you should learn how to let them go. Sometimes, it's simple things like telling yourself, "Well, I've done enough for today." But how much is enough?

There was one time when I was with Ajaan Fuang. We'd been working for a good part of the day. Then he unexpectedly said in the evening, "Okay, let's sit and meditate all night tonight." I was really tired. I just didn't think I could do it. So I said that to him. He gave me a very skeptical look and said, "Well, is it going to kill you?" "Well, no." "Then you can do it." I had to stretch my idea of what was possible. Because when you're dealing with your defilements, sometimes you can treat them gently. Sometimes all you have to do is just look at them and they go away. Other times, though, you really have to fight them. And as in any battle, you're not always able to choose when and where you're going to have to do battle, or how hard it's going to be. It's not that they'll come when you're ready for them and feel up to fighting them. Sometimes they come when you're most worn out, feel least like doing battle, yet you've got to do it. If you don't handle them then, they're just going to take over.

So it's good to have other people to point this out to you, so that you're not always siding with your own hindrances, you're not always siding with your own defilements, and so that you can expand your imagination. You can expand your conception of what the training is all about, what's possible through the training.

I was talking the other day with a Buddhist scholar whose idea was that the end of suffering is simply learning to be equanimous all the time. He didn't believe that nibbana had anything to do more than just that: a state of equanimity. There's nothing transcendent, nothing outside the realm of what we normally

know in our senses: That's what he said. But that viewpoint is a result of a very narrow range of imagination, a very narrow concept of what can be done in the practice.

So this is what that admirable friend can do for you: to help to expand your conception of what's possible. When the Buddha talks about the end of suffering, the end of stress, exactly how far does that go?

I was reading the other day that a distinction between a talented person and a genius. A talented person is someone who can shoot a target that other people can see but have trouble shooting themselves. A genius is someone who can see and shoot a target that other people can't even see. That's the kind of person the Buddha was. People during his time were arguing about whether the world was eternal or not, infinite or not, whether an awakened person continued to exist or not after death: mostly metaphysical issues like that. But the Buddha was more perceptive. He saw that those weren't the real problems. The real problem was this issue of suffering, stress. He saw the target and he hit it. That's why he's still the ultimate admirable friend. As he said, if it weren't for him, we'd still be just mucking around in our suffering. We'd have no idea what the noble eightfold path was like and whether it could do anything for us. These qualities of mindfulness and concentration that we have to some extent: How far they can be trained? How far they can be developed? Without his example, we might not even ask ourselves these questions, much less try to answer them.

It's through knowing of his example and hearing his teaching, realizing that there is this possibility that goes beyond our normal conception of what we're capable of: That's how he's our admirable friend. That's how admirable friendship lies at the basis of the path. As he told Ven. Ananda, it's the whole of the holy life. In other words, it's what makes the holy life possible. We have to do the work ourselves, but it's good to have our minds expanded, our imagination expanded, so that we'll be willing to put in the effort when we don't normally feel like it.

Then we can turn around and look at our intentions more carefully. The times when we say that our intentions are good: Are they really good? Turn around and look at what you're actually doing as a result of these intentions. Is there any harm? Maybe you have to cast a more skeptical eye at your own intentions. This is important.

So these are the two main qualities. The primary internal quality that you bring to the practice is appropriate attention, seeing things in terms of the four noble truths so that you can develop the skills appropriate to each. The primary external quality is admirable friendship: finding someone whose conviction, virtue, generosity, and discernment you admire, and learning about these things

from that person so that you can develop those qualities in yourself. When you've got these two qualities working together, you can go far.