

Unskillful Habits

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Insight is something that can't be willed. But the mind can be primed so that it does give rise to insight. That's what meditation does: We're priming the mind so that it's able to see things clearly and, in particular, to see the way it's creating stress and suffering for itself and doesn't have to. We're training it so that we can catch ourselves in the act and then be able to stop, to let go. It's like knowing something very important is going to happen at a particular intersection, and you may not be able to time it, or know exactly what it's going to be, but you can post yourself at the intersection and learn how to watch carefully, so that you see it when it happens.

So as we are meditating, we're putting ourselves in a position, we're positioning ourselves in the right spot, right here at the breath. As you stay here, you get to see a lot of things going on in the mind, a lot of things going on in the body. Yet, while you're with both the mind and the body, you're able to step back from both a bit. You can sense the mind as you get grounded in the breath. You get out of your head and can see conversations going on in the mind. Instead of jumping in and taking one role or the other in those conversations, as you often do, you're able to step back.

The same with the body: You're able to watch the body, but because you have the breath as your anchor and as your tool for dealing with things that are coming up in the body, you don't feel threatened by pains or areas of discomfort. You don't have to jump into every pain, every problem that arises in the body. You can step back and watch.

But being in the right position is not enough. You also have to learn how to look. Sometimes learning how to look means changing your old habits. This is where some of the programming of the meditation comes in: priming yourself to look for certain things, learning to ask the right questions, particularly when it comes to the unskillful mental states, your old habits. Anger, irritation: Those are habits. Lust, greed, desire: Those are habits as well. We often just follow along with them. They're old ruts. They seem to be old friends, but they're just old ruts. The mind unthinkingly follows them one step to the next and the next, believing that they're all necessarily connected. But it just happens to be a pattern we've learned to follow.

Part of learning to get out of those habits is to create new habits. It's in the creating of a new habits that we learn to see. This is not simply an exercise in

behavioralist psychology, forcing you into new pattern of behavior and thinking that if you simply replace one habit with another, that's the end of the problem. It's in going against the old ruts that you start seeing and understanding things. You resist certain connections. For example, you come across an incident that you don't like, but instead of going immediately to the not-liking, you go to the observer. Or you train yourself to look for the ways in which you can endure whatever it is that's coming up, and you see that the potential for endurance is there, simply that you didn't develop it before.

The same with lust: A lot of lust has to do with visualization. Often we rarely see the object of our lust. Instead, we see our ideas about what would excite lust, because we like the lust. If the object, the person we're lusting for, doesn't have all the right features, well, we begin to sketch a little here, and add a little there, and take a little bit away. It's all in our imagination. So in dealing with lust, we have to learn to visualize a new way. This is what the contemplation of the 32 parts of the body is all about.

A lot of our delusions about the human body start from our delusions about our own body. That's why we have to start this contemplation with our own body, taking our own body apart. As the Buddha once pointed out, it's our sense of attraction to our own body that then spreads out and makes us attracted to the opposite sex. So this is where we start.

Look at how you visualize your own body, and then look at how it actually looks. Then start visualizing the inside, section by section, piece by piece. See what you've got here. Make that a habitual practice. Every day, do it at least once, twice, three times. Actually, you don't have to count the times, just keep doing it for a while, so that it becomes second nature. That way, as soon as the mind starts cooking up an image that would get you attracted, you can tell yourself that there is this other side as well. Having a basis in the breath enables you to step back, so that you can catch yourself engaging in lust, and then you've got the antidote right there. This begins to put you in a position where you can gain some real insight into the fact that it's not the object out there that's got you lusting. It's the drive in the mind.

As Ajaan Lee used to say, this is one of the fermentations: the fermentation of sensuality. Where does it come from? It ferments out of the mind, bubbles up in the mind. We go out looking for something to lust after. Sometimes what we find fits in line with our preconceived pictures; sometimes it doesn't. But look at the role those pictures play. You can invent other pictures as well to thwart them, to get in the way.

If taking apart the body in the present moment isn't enough, you can visualize it ten, twenty, thirty, forty, fifty years down the line, to the point where it's dead, decomposing. You cremate it, until it's nothing but ashes and dust. Then reverse the timeline, back to the present. Put it back together again. See what that does to your attitude toward the body.

Often, when Ajaan Fuang had students who got images of their bodies in their meditation, he would have them do just that: Go through five or ten year increments, until finally the body dies. Let it sit around for a couple of days, see what it looks like as it decomposes. Then cremate it until it's nothing but dust. But there's the awareness that's aware of the dust. Then you put the body back together again and bring it back to what it looks like in the present moment.

You realize that what you've got here is a fabrication, something made out of physical elements, something you've moved into and about which you've assumed a lot of things—about how much it's going to cooperate, how much it's going to do this for you, how much it's going to do that for you—even though it hasn't entered into any agreements at all. All the suppositions are on the side of your desires. Pointing you back to the mind: That's what the purpose of all these exercises are for. The same with irritation, the same with anger.

We've often found in the past that we get our way by being angry, but when we stop and look at it, we're also creating a lot of kamma for ourselves, a lot of bad kamma. We have to stop and think for a while: Anger is not the positive thing we think is. We sometimes we say that injustice wouldn't be fought without that anger. Well, it can be fought without anger. In fact, it's most effectively fought without anger. If we've been the victims of injustice, we don't like to think that we've somehow been complicit in it. But that's what the four noble truths are pointing us to: the suffering we create for ourselves. That's the issue. The suffering coming from outside was not the main issue. It is an issue, but because we pile on our own suffering inside, we make it more and more difficult to deal properly with the outside stuff.

So straightening out our own mind is not a question of laying the blame on us. It's just saying that if we can't take care of this issue inside, we won't be able to take care of issues outside. This has to come first.

After all, look at what happens through anger. There's a great passage where the Buddha says that when a person is angry, he does things and says things and thinks things that his enemy would be pleased to see happen. You look ugly, you drive away your friends, you harm your own well-being. Black seems white, white seems black, everything gets mixed up. What you think you're doing to put yourself in a good position actually puts you in a bad position, and vice versa. You

destroy your good reputation. All these things are things that an enemy would find pleasing.

This line of thinking was the Buddha's first line of defense against anger. He doesn't teach you to love your enemy at that point. Instead, he asks, do you really want to please your enemy by acting in this way? That brings you up short. Then he has you step back and just look at the situation in terms of the laws of kamma and action: Do you really do want to do something unskillful right now? Can you see clearly right now that anger clouds your vision?

The problem is often that, under the influence of anger, you seem to see so clearly what should be said, what should be done. That's because you've narrowed the range of your attention. Your mind has been tunneled, so you can see only one thing that seems the obvious thing to be done, the obvious thing to be said. That's because you blocked off all your sense of shame, all your sense of concern for the results of your actions.

So as you step back and look for a while, look in terms of the teaching on kamma. Remember that you're a human being, and this is what the human world is like. There are going to be people who do things and say things that are displeasing to you, displeasing to people who love, or pleasing the people you hate. This is the nature of the world. It's got to be this way. If you let that put you into an unskillful mental state, you're at a disadvantage.

So again, having the breath to fall back on helps in a lot of ways. It helps you to breathe through a lot of the tension in the body that would make you want to get the anger out of your system, or get that feeling of confinement, that feeling of discomfort out of your system. You're now in a position where you can watch: What is this anger? Does it give you a realistic picture of what is going on? Does it give a realistic picture of what should be done? Having the breath here helps you to step back.

A lot of this reflection, of course, depends on having practiced beforehand. This is why the Buddha has us reflect, in the case of lust, on the 32 parts of the body on a regular basis. In the case of anger, he says to think about the principle of kamma. It's one of those five subjects for frequent recollection: "I am the owner of my actions, heir to my actions"—all the way down the line. All living beings are in the same boat.

This way, when unskillful mental states come, you've got these new habits, these new habitual ways of thinking, to counter them. Having the breath as your foundation puts you in a position where you can counter them. Having practiced, learning new habits, means that you've got your tool ready to use.

So don't wait until the anger comes or wait until the lust comes before you do these contemplations. Get into practice. You don't have to wait before your concentration is really, really good before you can do this. It's good practice in advance.

It's like going down to the gym. As you exercise bit by bit by bit, you get stronger. If you've got work that needs to be done, you use the body you've got. You don't wait until you're really, really strong and then do work. There's always work to be done. So you take the strength you've got and you put it to use. In the course of putting it to use, you get better, you get stronger. Those good habits become the new ruts in your mind. At the same time as the ruts start crisscrossing each other, it puts you in a different position where you can see things a lot more clearly. Instead of just going with the flow, you create new branch canals, which give you new perspectives, new points of view, a new range of choices as to what you can do.

It's in this way that these programming practices—reflecting on kamma, reflecting on the 32 parts of the body, all the various reflections that we have—even though they're willed, put you in the right position. They give you the right questions to ask. You start to question your old habits: Does it really have to be that way? Is that really the best way to act? Could you act in a better way?

Don't think of this as a process of self-improvement. Think of it as action improvement, word improvement, thinking improvement. Get your image of self out of the way. Just look directly at what you're doing, see it for what it is, see it for the results that come.

You see that as you train the mind in these new habits—even though it doesn't cut anger or lust at the root—at least you're putting yourself in a position where you'll be able to do that. At the very least, it shows you that there are alternative ways of dealing with the world that lift you up out of your old habits and give you new habits and new perspectives. This, combined with the concentration practice, gets you to ask new questions.

The whole point of the practice is to have you asking questions, the right questions. If everything were answered, if all the answers were laid out, this wouldn't be a challenging practice. All you'd have to do would be to memorize things. Too many people go through life like that, wanting their religion to teach them that they don't have to think. It gives them all the answers, makes everything all very clear and one-dimensional.

But that's not the type of teaching that makes you grow. The whole point of the Buddha's teachings is to get you to ask questions that will make you grow, and it gives you the tools with which you can find the answers. Only in that way can

this practice really engage all of you as a human being and provoke the kind of insights that really go deep, that really do make a difference, that ultimately cut through the basic misunderstanding that underlies lust, that underlies anger, and all your other unskillful habits.