

A Positive-Sum Game

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Okay, focus on your breath. And as for thoughts that go in any other direction, just put them aside.

This is a game where there are no losers. Each time you can put aside a thought, you win. As for the thought, it doesn't lose. It just goes away. There's no person there losing. So just keep coming back to the breath. See how long you can maintain this intention.

And make the breath comfortable. There's no need to sit here with an uncomfortable breath. No one's forcing you to breathe in an uncomfortable way, so explore to see what kind of breathing feels good. It might be longer or shorter, deeper, more shallow, heavier or lighter: You've got room to experiment.

Because that's how you learn. You learn by experimenting. You can't just sit watching passively and hope to learn anything at all. If you're just passive, you don't know what's causing what. Two things may happen in succession, but you don't know: Are they connected or are they not connected? The only way to find out is to change one of them and see if the other one changes as well.

So you take an active role in getting the mind to settle down, providing a good place to stay and then looking after it to make sure it stays here, no matter what thought comes up.

You may have heard that sitting in concentration doesn't get you anywhere and you've got to do insight practice. So you start getting impatient to go on to the insight. Well, that impatience right now is a disturbance. So you have to let that go, too. There's a lot to learn simply in getting the mind to settle down.

Don't think you can do pure concentration practice without getting any insight. The two qualities have to go together. You need insight into the mind in order to get it to settle down. Once it's settled down, then every time you overcome a desire to move off someplace else, you gain insight.

The mind will come up with all kinds of reasons, saying, "You've got to think about this, you've got to think about that. And what are you doing here sitting just being very still? Where's your insight?" Learn to see through all those different arguments. And as you learn how to sidestep them, that's how you gain insight.

As I said, this is a game in which there are no losers. It's a positive-sum game. Most of us in life live in a world where we think every game is a zero-sum game. If somebody else gains something, we lose. If they lose, we gain. And so there's a constant battle back-and-forth. If someone else gets the advantage, we've got to take it away from them somehow.

But it turns out that that's not a zero-sum game, it's a negative-sum game. Both sides lose in games of that sort because both sides end up doing things and saying things and thinking things that are really harmful. And then what happens? You both die. And what do you have left? All the habits that you've built in your mind. And because both sides have been building bad habits, you've lost and the other person's lost. As they say, even if you win

the rat race, you're still a rat.

So it's important that you don't play those games. The important games are the ones where you come out ahead and the other person comes out ahead. That means you focus mainly on this game inside: on what's in charge inside your mind.

In the world outside, some people gain power, other people lose power. But that kind of power usually doesn't mean anything in the long-term. Look at all the powerful people in the past: Where are they now? What did they gain from their use of power? The only way they may have gained is if they used their power for the good. But most people don't do that.

Yet if you look inside the mind, here's something where you can gain power, gain control over the mind for the purpose of concentration, for the purpose of discernment, for the purpose of release. That's a game when there are no losers. It's a positive-sum game.

So focus on what you can control. Learn how to get some control over your mind: where it's going, what it's going to focus on. You do have the choice, you know, even as you're sitting here right now. There's all kinds of sensory input coming in. We've tried to minimize it by coming to a quiet place and closing our eyes, but still there are the feelings in your body, there's the warmth of the air, there's the sound of the crickets, there's the far-off sound of the water pump, occasionally there's an airplane coming by overhead, there are the small sounds of other people in the room. You could focus on those and work up all kinds of narratives, all kinds of scenarios. But why? What do you get out of it?

You've got the choice. You could focus on your breath or you can do all kinds of other things. So learn to focus on the breath and then stick with that intention. Each time you've overcome the impulse to go someplace else, there's a small victory in the mind.

The mind will come up with all kinds of reasons as to why you should move someplace else. As you learn to see through those reasons, that's another victory. You've gained some insight into how the mind pushes itself around, how it lets itself be pushed around. Each time you've learned to see through those subterfuges, you've gained a victory.

The more you gain control over the mind, then the more you're in control of other situations as well. In other words, you're in control of the situation to the extent that you don't let yourself get pulled into your old habits, your old negative-sum habits.

As you develop strength inside, you realize that external victories really don't mean much. The internal victories are the ones that really mean something, because you carry them with you. Even as you age, grow ill, and die, you carry them with you as well. And they can really help you when you need it.

Even the most powerful or wealthy people will reach a point in life where their power and wealth will mean nothing at all. And all they'll have left are the habits they developed as they exercised their power, as they used their wealth. And often those habits aren't helpful at all.

But if you learn to gain some control over your mind so that it doesn't go into areas that cause suffering, it doesn't go into areas that cause stress, doesn't go into areas that give rise to greed, anger, and delusion, impatience, fear, whatever: When you've gained the

concentration, the mindfulness, and the discernment to see through these things, those will be really good habits no matter where you go. No matter what your situation in life, they're going to be useful.

So that's what we're working on here, right now: the mindfulness to keep reminding yourself, "Stay with the breath"; the concentration that really does stick with it; the discernment that allows you to see what kind of breathing makes it easier to stay with the breath, what kind of breathing makes it harder, what kind of breathing gives you a sense of ease and fullness right here in the present moment. That's the beginning of discernment.

It looks small, it seems minor, but it's not. It helps you see cause and effect—and particularly the causes in the mind that lead to a sense of ease, the causes in the mind that lead to stress: That's the beginning of the four noble truths right there.

So this is a positive-sum game. If you learn to live life playing this game rather than getting involved in other games, everyone comes out ahead.