

Dealing with Confusion

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Take a deep breath. Take a couple of deep breaths. Get a sense of the energy in your body: the energy of the breathing and whatever other energy there may be there. Think of everything being coordinated, everything getting along. Each breath as it comes in mingles harmoniously with the breath energy already there. You can focus your attention on any one spot in the body that seems convenient or you can focus on the body as a whole right from the start. The choice is yours.

What's important is that you allow the breath to be a good place to stay, a comfortable place to stay. If the body seems tired or weak, think of breathing in a way that's more energizing. If you're tense, think of a way of breathing that's more relaxing. If your mind feels scattered, think of everything coming together: a sense of unity right here. What you're trying to do is to create a place where the mind can settle down and just watch what's going on in as balanced and impartial a way as possible.

This is how you train it, because the untrained mind is generally confused. We live in a world of a lot of conflicting opinions. We often find ourselves going in one direction and there's a voice that says, "No, you've got to go in another direction." When you go in that other direction, there's another voice that says, "No, you've got to back to the first or to a third one." You're pulled around all the time. And although, as a general social or political principle, it might be good to say, "Well, let's honor diversity, that there are lots of different opinions in the world," still, you want to find a set of opinions that you can live by so that you can make choices that are consistent, that go in a direction where you want to go. So what do you do?

There's that famous passage in the Kalama Sutta. The famous part is where the Buddha says, "Don't just go by texts. Don't go by what teachers say just because they're your teacher. Don't go by traditions." Sounds like, "Well, just listen to yourself." But then you look inside yourself and you see all these conflicting voices in there. You don't know which one is the one that's really going to guide you. And the Buddha himself actually says that in a lesser-known part of that passage, which is "Don't go simply by your idea of what's reasonable or what you like." So where does that leave you? He says, "Look at your actions." When you know for yourself that doing something is skillful, then you follow that. Or if a particular teaching leads you in a skillful direction, follow that teaching.

In other words, you have to test things in your actions. It's the only way you're going to get over your confusion, the only way you're going to get over your doubt. And to do this kind of test, you have to be as centered and as mindful and as alert as possible, because you have to look at your actions in terms of their intentions. You look at the action itself while you're doing it. And you look at the results that come out.

In all these areas, we tend to be pretty unalert. They've done tests on people. They hypnotize them and tell them, "You're going to do x ." Then, as they come out of hypnosis, the subjects find themselves doing x . When they're asked, "Why did you do x ?" they'll give a reason. They'll say, "Oh, I felt like it. I wanted to do it." Whatever. Experimenters said that this was proof that we don't have free will. We think we have free will, we think we have choice, but we don't. All that it really shows, though, is that people who are easily hypnotized can be very deluded about their motives. This goes for everybody whose mind is untrained.

We tend to be deluded about why we do things, partly because there are some motives that we're not really happy about. We don't like to see ourselves act on them, so we just cover up our eyes. Like those aliens—I forget what they're called in *Slaughterhouse Five*—who live throughout time. They can see all of time all at once and they see the end of the universe. The person who's talking to them says, "What do you do when you see the end of the universe?" They say, "We cover our eyes." That doesn't make it go away.

The same goes for our actions: We're not really paying attention to what we're doing because we're often thinking about what we're going to do next. Or we think about what we want to get out of the action and we're not really looking at what we're doing. As for the results, again, sometimes we don't like the results of our actions, so we close our eyes. This is why there's so much delusion in our lives.

When you first look at these three stages of action, it's pretty disconcerting. You see all the different things in your mind that you really don't like—all the unskillful voices, all the unskillful motives. This is why you want to get the breath as comfortable as possible so that you can put yourself in a good mood, feeling settled, at ease, so that you can see the mind's negative states without getting sucked into them, without getting depressed by them, without getting upset: simply, "Oh, yes, there's that, too." This is where the image of the mind as a committee is useful because you can see the voices in the mind as members of the committee, but you don't have to go along with them. They may be campaigning. They may be trying to influence you in a particular direction and it may have been the case that you've given in to them many times in the past, but you don't have to give in to them now. You can just watch them for a while, even though it may be

disconcerting to see that, yes, you've been nurturing all these beasts inside the mind.

The first step in learning how not to be overpowered by them is to recognize them and also to realize you do have the opportunity to step back. This is how you begin to exert your free will, exert your power of choice, not by making up a narrative of why you do something, but actually looking at what's there and making a choice. As the Buddha once said, if it weren't possible for people to choose the skillful course of action or to develop skillful mental states, he wouldn't have taught it. But it is possible. And if it weren't beneficial to develop skillful mental states, he wouldn't have taught that, either. But it is beneficial, so that's why he taught it. And it wasn't the case that he was working with perfect human beings back then. Everybody had the same kinds of greed, anger, delusion, fear, jealousy, pride, hypocrisy: all the things we don't like about ourselves. These are not recent inventions. They've been with the human race since who knows when.

This is why it's useful, when you sit down to meditate, to think about the Buddha's awakening. His first knowledge had to do with his past lives. We sit here thinking of the narratives of our lives. Well, he had how many thousands and thousands and thousands of narratives to look at? But he didn't get sucked in. He just noticed: "There's that."

That led to the next question: "How about everybody else? Did they have the same issues, the same problems? And what pattern is there in this?" Because when you look at one person's narratives, it's hard to see patterns. But when you look at the world as a whole, he said, you can see all beings passing away and then being reborn in line with their karma, i.e., based on what they had done. What they had done was based on their views, and their views were based on who they respected or who they listened to, which points of view they picked up, whether they were from noble people or not from noble people.

The third knowledge took that insight and applied it to the present moment: what intentions, what views, could put an end to this endless cycle of death and rebirth. When he answered that question, that led to his awakening.

Notice that the movement goes from individual narratives to looking at the world as a whole and then focusing on the present moment. So it's good to think about that when you find yourself tied up in defilements in the mind, unskillful mental states in the mind that you really don't feel comfortable with. Remind yourself: Everybody has these to a greater or lesser extent and everybody's been through them, so it's not that you're particularly bad or particularly confused. This is part of the general pattern, and the whole purpose of the practice is to

work with that general pattern, to bring it in line with the Buddha's third insight, which is how you can put an end to suffering by developing skillful qualities.

Then, as you develop mindfulness and alertness, trying to keep them as continuous as possible, you begin to see the connection between your motivations and the actual actions while they're happening—which choices you're making—and then the results that come about it. Again, we don't often see the connection between our actions and the results because we aren't paying constant attention. We're jumping around here and there and the other place. It's like a needle on a record. If the needle were to jump around, you'd get zip zap, zip zap. You couldn't make any sense out of it at all. But if the needle stays in the groove, you get a continuous story, the continuous song, the continuous narrative. You see how things are connected.

Then if you see that the particular action and motivation was a mistake, you go back and look at it again and learn how to compensate for it. Learn how to make up your mind not to make that particular mistake again. You've seen the connection. It's important that you see that it's not necessary.

If you're stymied as to how to deal with it, you go talk to somebody else. This is the other part of the Kalama Sutta that tends to get ignored: that you listen to the counsel of the wise. There are other people who have been on this path before you, starting with the Buddha and going through all of his noble disciples. So you want to look around: Who around you is wise? This, of course, depends on your own honest powers of observation. So again, it comes back down to your own honesty. This is why the Buddha asked for someone who was one, observant; two, truthful. He would teach that person the Dhamma.

It's in this way that the practice is a process of feeling your way, but it's only through noticing what's skillful and what's unskillful in the mind in terms of what results you get by acting on which voices, which intentions. That's how you overcome doubt. That's how you overcome confusion.

So this is why the Buddha recommended that you ask yourself, "What when you put into practice is skillful and what is not? What's praised by the wise? What's criticized by the wise?" This is the only way you're going to get past all the confusion of voices in your head; the confusion of voices around you. It requires patience. It requires a certain amount of stability, consistency, stamina.

And this is why we work with the breath. It's not something boring just to come back to. It's our standing point and you make it your personal standing point by learning how to make it comfortable so that you get a sense of ease that suffuses the body. Don't think of the body as a clunky, solid object sitting here that you've got to expand and contract, expand and contract. Think of it as a large,

amorphous energy field where the patterns of tension are unnecessary, where the boundaries or blockages are unnecessary. Just imagine everything penetrating everything else so that there's an easy flow of energy. There's an easy flow of whatever's moving in the body. You don't have to impose limits. You don't impose boundaries on things. In this way, you develop a place where you can take a stance. You can stay here with a sense of ease and well-being, a sense of belonging here.

Because where are you going to see your motivations? Where are you going to see it? You're going to see them right here. When you see your actions, where are they going to be? You're going to see them right here. When you see the results of your actions, where are you going to see them? You're going to see them right here. So this is the best seat in the house. Everything you need to see, you can see from this position. As things get more balanced and find a greater equilibrium, you find yourself in a better and better position to see things clearly. It's like a scientist running an experiment. If you put your equipment on a table, you want to make sure the table is solid, and that the solid table is standing on a solid floor. That way, the measurements you get out of the equipment are more likely to be precise, accurate, reliable.

The Buddha has a statement that the self is its own mainstay, i.e., your mind is its own mainstay, but it can be its own mainstay only if you develop it. What's going to develop the mind? Well, the mind's going to develop the mind—but it's only through this constant process of settling in and watching what your intentions are, what your actions are, what the results are. That's how you develop the quality of learning how to be more and more reliable to yourself, more and more your own mainstay. This is how you work your way out of confusion.