

## *How to Look, How to Listen*

*August 30, 2022*

We chant every day that the Dhamma is *opānāyiko*. It's translated as "pertinent." But pertinent to what? Pertinent to the problems in your own mind. Another way of translating it is, "something to be brought inward." You take the Dhamma inward and use it as a measuring stick for your own mind, to see where you're still lacking, to see where you're off-course, to see what you can learn. And you know that the *ajāns* say that when you listen to a Dhamma talk as you're meditating, ninety percent of your attention should be to the meditation and only a small percentage to the talk. Still, if the talk is relevant, if it's pertinent to you, take it in. If it's not, let it go by.

One important principle is that you don't use it as a measuring stick to measure other people. We're not here to measure one another or to hit one another with the measuring stick. We're here to work on our own minds. As the Buddha said, for some people the practice is pleasant and slow, for some it's pleasant and fast, for others it's painful and slow, for others it's painful and fast. So we're not here to compete. We're here to work on our own minds.

So if a Dhamma teaching is not relevant to where you are right now, just let it go. Stay with the breath. Try to inhabit your body as fully as you can with your awareness. There already is an awareness there, but you try to inhabit with your conscious awareness, your full awareness: the awareness you usually bring to focus on an issue, on what you're trying to read, on what you're trying to listen to, or on one spot in the body.

Try to bring the same intensity to everything. Now, that doesn't mean you blot out the rest of your body with your eye-focus. Just the opposite. You try to let each part of the body have its own awareness as fully as possible. Try to think of every cell in the body breathing in, breathing out. And establish yourself in here as much as you can. Work with the breath until everything is at ease in the body, with a sense of fullness, a sense of energy.

It's good to start with long breathing to energize the body, because you'll soon be calming it down. If you start out calm and make it even calmer, sometimes you put yourself to sleep. So try to find the right balance. Then, as the issues of the breath get lighter and lighter, you'll be able to see your own mind. That's what we're here for: to see the mind. We use the breath as bait to get the mind in the present moment, to clear things out in the body, so that they don't interfere with your ability to observe your mind and to see what needs to be done.

One thing you have to take into account, of course, is the amount of energy you have. Of the five faculties, that's the one you have to start out with, even though it's not first in the list. The Buddha said that this is the one you use to measure how much you're going to be acting on your conviction, how much you're going to be expecting out of your mindfulness, your concentration, and discernment. He gives the image of playing a lute. Back in those days, lutes probably had five strings. And as you know, in playing with any stringed instrument, you tune one string first, and then you tune the remaining strings to the first string. In this case, the first string is: How much energy do you have? If your energy is low, it's not the day to tell yourself, "I'm going to sit here until my flesh and blood dry out, and I won't get up until I achieve supreme awakening." You tell yourself, "I'm going to get through this as well I can, with as much mindfulness as I can." Then adjust your conviction, your mindfulness, your concentration, and discernment to the amount of energy you've got.

Sometimes you might find that the breath is hard to focus on, in which case you move to goodwill: goodwill for yourself, goodwill for others. Goodwill for yourself is so that you don't berate yourself or criticize yourself for the fact that your energy is low—realizing that we all have our ups and downs. Goodwill for others is to counteract the tendency, when things are not going well in your own mind, to focus on the faults of other people—and you can make a detailed list. I'm sure everybody has been analyzed by other people in the monastery here in the monastery, as to what their problems are. But why? For what purpose?

The Buddha says that when you look at other people, it's mainly to see: "This is what skillful behavior looks like; this is what unskillful behavior looks like." Then you turn around and ask yourself, "Do I have that?" If someone has some skills that you don't have, you might tell yourself, "Well, this is a good time to work on those skills. If they can do it, so can I." As for unskillful habits they may have, you ask yourself, "Do I have those unskillful habits, too?" Often, other people's unskillful habits—the ones that drive us crazy—are precisely the ones *we* have. So we have to look into that. Use other people as a mirror. And as the Buddha said, don't exalt yourself or disparage others.

In the opposite way, other people seem to be doing better in some things than you are, but don't get upset by that.

For each of us, the practice has its rhythm. Sometimes the rhythm is slow; sometimes it's faster. If you go into it with a lot of preconceived notions about how it should be, you end up not really listening to what the mind needs, what the body needs right now. The more sensitive you are to the needs of the body and the needs of the mind right now, the more the practice will be able to grow in a proper

and balanced way—and the more you’ll learn. If you come in with a lot of preconceived notions, you’re not going to learn anything. You’ll see that “This doesn’t fit with my preconceived notions, and that doesn’t fit with my preconceived notions.” That’s not learning. That’s being judgmental. You have to ask yourself, “My preconceived notions: Are they really worth holding on to? Are they really valid?” If you learn how to question your attitudes that way, then you can learn.

There’s an image that you find throughout the Buddhist traditions: the teacher pouring tea into a cup and then he just keeps pouring and pouring and pouring until the cup overflows. The message for the student is: You’ve got to throw out what’s in your cup. Then you can receive some good new tea. Otherwise, the tea that gets poured in just flows out.

So try to be as sensitive as you can, right here, right now, because that’ll enable you to learn things you didn’t see before. After all, this is a path for the attaining of the as-yet-unattained, the realization of the as-yet-unrealized. Which means you’re going to have to do things you haven’t done before, and you’re not going to know what those things are unless you listen carefully. If it’s a Dhamma talk, there might be something new there that you haven’t heard before, or the opportunity to relearn what you *have* heard before—at the same time you’re listening to the breath, listening to the mind.

This is a matter of figuring out what their needs are, what their strengths are right now, what their weaknesses are right now, and how you adjust your attitude, so you can grow the plant that you have. The image is of a seed that you planted and it’s beginning to grow, but it doesn’t quite look like the tree you wanted, or whatever plant you wanted, so you push it and pull it and basically shred it, because it’s not what you thought it should be.

This is another image that’s very common in the forest tradition. You plant the seed. The tree knows how to grow if you give it the right conditions. It may be slower than you thought it should be or may put out a few extra shoots that you didn’t expect, but as long as you’re putting the right conditions in, in terms of your sensitivity and your desire, your persistence, your intent, and your ingenuity—the four qualities that lead to success—the plant’s bound to grow, and it’ll grow in a healthy way.

So remember, we’re here to learn. Ordinarily, we’re causing ourselves suffering and we don’t know why. If we knew why, we wouldn’t be doing it. There’s the discernment that comes from listening or from reading, and there’s the discernment that comes from thinking things through—and you need both. But the discernment that’s really going to make a difference is the discernment that

comes from developing. That means you try to develop mindfulness, you try to develop alertness, ardency, concentration, discernment. And, of course, in developing those things, you're going to learn things you didn't know before.

When the Buddha sets out the factors for the path, he always starts with right view, but it's not the case that the view is automatically one hundred percent right from the start. As he explains when he divides the factors of the path into the triple training, right view and right resolve are the factors of heightened discernment. Right speech, right action, and right livelihood are factors of heightened virtue. Right effort, right mindfulness, and right concentration are factors for heightened concentration, or the heightened mind. But then when he lists the order in which they come as the triple training is accomplished, he starts with virtue and then the concentration, and then—from the virtue and the concentration—you foster discernment. So the message is that right view can come in with right ideas about meditation or mindfulness, but the actual lessons you're going to learn from actually doing mindfulness and doing concentration may not be what you expect. The major outlines will stay the same, but the details may be different—not what you expect.

So prepare to be surprised as to which insights will work, which insights will come to you, the ones that actually help you let go of your clinging, let go of your craving. But it requires that you focus your attention inside. Look for your own faults. The faults of others are *their* business, because you're not suffering from their faults. You can make yourself suffer over their faults, but it's the "making yourself suffer": That's the problem, because it often turns around and you start making them suffer, too.

But if you look inside and see: "I'm thinking in the wrong way. I'm breathing in the wrong way. I'm focusing on the wrong perceptions," that's when you learn. In other words, you look at how you're fabricating things in an unskillful way, because this is how dependent co-arising gets set into motion. You're fabricating in ignorance. You're putting together your experience, right here, right now, and you're hardly even aware of how you're doing it. But if you bring some knowledge to the process, then the fabrication becomes part of the path.

So. Look inwards. Listen inwards. Make this your primary focus, and that'll solve a lot of problems, both inside and out.