

The Participatory Present

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When you try to settle into the present moment, sometimes you find sticks, rocks, and thorns. They can be either in the body or in the mind, and you have to do your best to deal with them. It would be nice if you could simply follow some easy, step-by-step instructions: 1,2,3,4, first you do this and then you do that, and then the results come without your having to figure anything out on your own. And sometimes there *are* instructions like that in meditation books—but often the mind doesn't fall in line with them. Ideally you should be able to let the mind settle down and grow calm and *then* deal with difficult issues, but sometimes before you can settle down you've got to deal with some difficulties first.

It's not only the case that discernment requires concentration. Concentration also requires discernment—learning how to bypass whatever issues you can bypass and how to deal directly with the ones you have to deal with before you can get the mind to settle down.

If there's rampant lust or anger in the mind, you've got to deal with it. You can't pretend it's not there. You can't shove it off into the corner, for it'll keep jumping out of the corner back at you. So you remind yourself of the drawbacks of that kind of thinking; you look to see where there's a lack of reasoning or a lack of logic in that kind of thinking. Many times that thinking simply comes at you with a lot of force, just as a belligerent person comes at you with a lot of force to make up for his lack of reason.

So you look at your lust, look at your anger, look at your fears, and try to see, "What are they actually saying?" Sometimes you have to listen to them. If you listen really carefully you'll see that after a while they don't make any sense. When you can see that, it's a lot easier to put them aside. When they come back at you, say, "You're not making any sense at all." Then you've got a handle on them.

The same with physical pain. Sometimes when you sit down to meditate there's pain in the body and it has nothing to do with the meditation posture. It's simply there no matter what your posture. So you have to learn how to deal with it. Focus on other parts of the body so you get at least *some* sense of having a beachhead in the present moment, a place where you can stay and you're okay. Then you work from that position of strength. Once you get a sense of the breath going smoothly and comfortably, you let it expand from that spot into other parts of the body, moving through the part where there's pain and out the feet and out the hands.

You begin to realize that those thorns in the present are *not* just a given. There has to be a part of you that's playing along with them, that's making them a problem. Once you see that, the thorns are a lot easier to deal with.

Sometimes there's a pain in the body and the way you're breathing is actually maintaining it. Sometimes the problem is your fear that it's going to spread, which makes you build a little shell of tension around it—and while that shell of tension may keep the pain from spreading, it also keeps it in existence. The breath energy doesn't flow smoothly there, and that helps maintain the pain. When you catch yourself doing this, you get an interesting insight: The present moment is not just something given. You're participating in it. An element of your intention is shaping it.

Then you can turn around and use this same principle with the mind. When there's lust or anger, part of it may be coming from past habit, but another part from your present participation. It's easy to understand this in the case of lust. You're enjoying it and so you want to continue it. Actually, part of the mind is enjoying it while another part is suffering. What you want to do is bring the suffering part out, give it voice, give it some space to express itself.

This is especially needed in our culture. People who don't submit to their lust are said to be repressed and have all kinds warped beasts in the basement. So the part of the mind that thrives when it's freed from lust doesn't get a chance. *It* gets pushed into the corner of the basement. *It* becomes the repressed part. But if you can ferret out the part of the mind that's really enjoying the lust and say: "Hey, wait a minute, what kind of enjoyment is this? How about that stress over there? How about that discomfort over there? The sense of dissatisfaction that comes along with the lust, the cloudiness that comes into the mind because of the lust—how about that?" You can start to highlight the part of the mind that really doesn't enjoy the lust. Then you have a better chance of dealing with the lust and working your way out from under its thumb.

The same with anger: Try to find the part of the mind that's enjoying the anger. See what kind of happiness it gets from indulging in the anger. See how piddling and miserable that happiness is. That way you strengthen the part of the mind that really doesn't want to play along.

The same goes with other emotions, such as fear or greed: Once you catch the part of the mind that's enjoying it—participating, keeping it going right now—learn to undercut it. Learn how to emphasize the part that doesn't want to play along.

Then you can start applying the same principle to positive mind states, the ones that you're trying to develop. If you're conscious of the part of the mind that doesn't want to stay with the breath, try to find the part of the mind that does, that really appreciates having a chance to settle down and let go of its burdens. The potential is there, simply that it's not emphasized.

So learn to give yourself pep talks. People who get easily discouraged are the ones who haven't learned that talent. You have to learn how to give yourself encouragement: "See? You did that. You brought the mind back. See if you can do it again the next time. See if you can do it faster." That's the kind of encouragement you need, the kind that keeps you participating in getting states of concentration going. After all, if the present isn't just a given, why don't you learn how to shape a good present? Emphasize the positive things, so they really do get stronger. That way you find that you're less and less a victim of events. You come to play a stronger, more positive role in shaping your experience of the present.

We talk many times about how ultimately you want to discontinue that participation in the present so that you can open up to the Deathless. But before you do that, you've got to get skillful in how you participate in the present moment. You can't skip straight from unskillful participation to the ultimate skill of learning how to open up to the Deathless. You've got to go through all of the stages of learning how to make the present a more positive experience—through the way you breathe, the way you focus on the breath, the way you deal with the various states, positive or negative, that come up in the mind. You've got to learn how to be a better manager of the present moment before you can develop the even more refined skills of learning how to take all of this participation apart.

So when you sit down to meditate, you've got to realize that not everything is a given. You're participating right now. What kind of participation do you want to develop? What kind of participation do you want to discontinue, to drop?

These pains—the stones and thorns and all the other things that make it hard to settle down: They're not just a given. Your element of participation helps create the stones, helps sharpen the thorns. If you can catch yourself doing that and can unlearn the habit, you find it a lot easier to settle down and stay settled. You can see more clearly what's going on, and your skill in dealing with the present gets more and more refined.