

On Not Being a Victim

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The mind has two basic functions. One is that it registers data coming in through the eyes, ears, nose, tongue, body, and intellect. And the other is that it wills things, tries to exert an influence on things outside. You might think of these as the passive and the active functions of the mind or the reactive and proactive functions, because even as the mind is receiving sense data, it's not totally passive. The willing function shapes the things you notice. Sometimes people complain about this: This is one of the reasons why we miss a lot of things in our lives, because we're intent on something else. That is a problem, but it can also be used to our advantage. When the Buddha describes dependent co-arising, well before he starts talking about sensory data, he talks about issues of attention and intention and perception. These factors influence the way you see and hear and experience things. And they can have an influence either for suffering or for the end of suffering.

So one of the functions of the path is to learn how to take this willing side of the mind—the side that has ways of attending to things and perceiving things and intending things—and turn that into the path.

One of the first things you notice as you meditate is that the mind does tend to switch back and forth between these two functions: the function that's simply registering what's going on and then reacting to that, and the other side that's more proactive. And you can see this very directly in the breath. You can simply watch the way the breath already seems to be, or you can put up a mental picture of how you would like the breath to be. Just a thought, don't try to force it in that direction, just think about it. Think about the breath coursing through the body. As soon as you breathe in, it goes all the way through the body, out to every pore. Just hold that image in mind. After a while, you begin to notice which sensations in the body seem to be corresponding to that picture you have. And you can try encouraging them a little bit.

In the beginning it should be just that, a little bit. Don't force things too much. Simply holding that different picture in mind helps you to read your experience in a different way, and also to shape your experience in a way that's more skillful. There may be a pain in the body in some place, and if you breathe in reaction to the pain, many times it just compounds the problem. In this way, the business of both reacting and then being proactive can get into some pretty nasty feedback loops. You feel trapped by a particular pain and then you breathe in reaction to that sense of feeling trapped, and then it makes the pain worse. You feel even more trapped and everything just spirals down.

But you could think in other ways. You see that even though there may be pain sensations in that part of the body, is that all there is in that part of the body? Are there other sensations that are not painful? And your proactive side of the mind begins to change the way you experience things.

In some cases, pain is a little hard to tackle straight on, so you work first with the breath. Just think of the breath going well through the body. Think of the body as being light, filled with breath energy, healthy breath energy, luminous

breath energy. Just hold that thought in mind. Don't be too impatient to see the results, because after all, the power of thought depends on a consistent strong thought that you can carry on over time. If you think a little bit and then scramble around looking for results from the thought, that's just a sign of impatience. The thought doesn't have time to exert any power, have any influence. So you learn how to hold that thought in mind and then look very gradually to see if there are any sensations in the body that would correspond to light breath energy, full breath energy, free-flowing breath energy, then you can encourage those. This helps you begin to see how much power the mind can have over shaping your experience.

In this way you take the willing part of the mind, the proactive part of the mind, and use it to your own advantage. This is why appropriate attention is such an important part of the path. When you could think about things in terms of who you are, what kind of person you are—you're the kind of person who's lazy, the kind of person who never finishes anything, the kind of person who is always a victim of events—and that just creates a vicious cycle. This is why the Buddha doesn't encourage you to think about what you are. Instead, he has you think about, "What's an action? What's the result of an action? What's an intention? What's a skillful intention?"

You can have all kinds of intentions that free up your mind. There are lots of different ways you can intend to focus on the breath. So find an intention that seems to get good results. It may not be the sort of intention that your preconceived notion of "you" would ever think of, but why confine yourself? Why make yourself a victim? Why leave yourself in that position? You can learn how to be proactive in a more skillful way. After all, all the elements of the path are fabricated. Your experience is fabricated through your intentions to begin with. And the path, everything from right view on down to right concentration: These are all fabrications. Right view means learning to look at things in a certain way, learning to look for certain things. So learn to look for some concentration, look for some stillness, look for mindfulness. Their potentials are there.

This is the Buddha's basic teaching on *dhatu*, or element or property. There are physical and mental potentials just waiting to be nourished, just waiting to be activated. But if you sit there as a victim all the time, you'll never activate the proper things. You'll activate all the wrong things.

So it's not like you're totally passive. You are shaping events, but at the moment you're shaping them under the influence of an unhealthy feedback loop. Following the path means taking the power of the mind that shapes things and using it for good purposes. Remember the kind of person the Buddha was. He didn't just react to events. He had a very strong sense of what should be: There should be an end to suffering. He focused his conviction on that. And the power of his conviction made a difference. It reshaped his mind, reshaped his experience of things. It shaped his mind until it reached a point where it could see things very clearly in terms of why there is suffering and how you can put an end to suffering. It didn't just happen; it happened through the force of his will. Not blind will, but strong will.

So put some conviction into the path. Put some conviction into yourself. Realize that you can fabricate the path in your own mind, put together all the various elements, find the potentials in your mind for mindfulness, alertness,

concentration, insight, and develop them. The mind has a power, and the problem is we tend to misuse it. We take that power and use it to create suffering, even though we don't want suffering. We just get into reactive modes, not realizing that we have the power to reshape our experience. Some people shape their experience in ways that are really harmful, but you can also shape your experience in ways that are conducive both to your happiness and the happiness of people around you. Conducive to understanding, conducive to release. So learn to take advantage of those powers, because that's the only way you're going to find your way out.