

Slowing Down to Look

January 21, 2005

If anything I say is relevant to what you're doing as you meditate, it'll come into your awareness without your having to direct your thoughts to the words. If it's not relevant to you, it may be relevant to someone else, so just let it pass.

There's a tendency in mindfulness practice to slow things down, to be more deliberate. Some people are afraid this is going to squeeze the spontaneity out of their life, because there's a part of us that wants to trust our feelings. Yet there's also a part of us that doesn't trust our feelings. We're caught in the middle.

Remember what we were saying last night about people who have an intuitive response to a situation, sometimes very quick, and often the situation requires a quick response. Something comes up in your life and you can't say, "noting, noting, noting." You've got to do something right away. The question is: How do you know when you can trust your intuitive responses, your immediate responses?

This is a lot of what meditation is for: to slow you down for a while so that you can see things more clearly. Remember the approach of the psychologists we were talking about. They would take video clips of people and would slow them down a great deal to watch very carefully to see what was going on, the micro-expressions that you might have missed otherwise. Then, when they began to see precisely which expressions, which measurements, were the really relevant ones, then they'd be able to speed things back up again, because they had trained themselves to notice things they hadn't noticed before.

This is precisely what you're doing in the meditation. One of the things that struck me about my time in Thailand—first with Ajaan Fuang and when I came back to the States and was studying with Ajaan Suwat—was that there were times when they made extremely quick decisions about things. I came to realize that it was because they had been able to slow down and look at their feelings, look at their intentions, and begin to see precisely which ones were skillful and which ones were not, in terms of what an intended action was going to be. When an emotion would come up—of course, I didn't know which emotion was coming up in their minds, but I could see that they would react very quickly, and with a lot of precision. The precision comes from the willingness to slow down for a while and watch.

This is why you need mindfulness practice, why you need concentration practice, to put your mind in a laboratory. You're going to stay right here at the breath. You can't wander off, can't go anywhere else. And like the elephant with its

forest memories and forest desires, the mind is going to stray. But if you treat it right, if you feed the elephant properly, play nice flute music in its ears, after a while it'll like being next to the post. When it settles down next to the post, then you can train it. And this is what the training is for: to learn to recognize your intentions, recognize your emotions as they come up, and be able to parse them.

This enables you to deal not so much in abstractions, but in direct perceptions of what's going on. One of the things you have to watch out for, as you practice, is dealing in huge abstractions—such as the question of whether Buddhism is in favor of desire or is it against desire? And the answer well, it's in favor of skillful desires and is against unskillful desires. Someone once accused the Buddha of being a nihilist, in the sense that he wouldn't come down clearly on one side of a question or another. They made this accusation to one of his lay students, and the student's response was, "Well, the Buddha was in favor of skillful actions, and against unskillful actions."

So just because an emotion comes along and is very strong and seems very true, it's not a sign that you can trust it. It's also not a sign that you have to distrust it. You have to learn how to parse it, take it apart. What exactly is going on in this desire? That way, you can tell whether it's skillful or not.

Some of the desires we talked about today are part of the path. There are other desires that are very much against the path. You have to learn how to read them. The same with any other strong emotions coming up in the mind. One of the questions today was about grief. I noticed as we were going through the papers you all signed yesterday, how many people have relatives who have just passed away, or family members who have been diagnosed with extremely serious diseases. Grief is bound to come up. And it's not that this group is any different from any other group. We have these problems all the time. So how do you deal with grief? The Buddha said that as long as you see that the grieving process is performing a useful service, continue with it. But keep an eye on it, because there comes a point where grieving become self-indulgent and detrimental.

This is what mindfulness is for: to step back from our emotions to parse them. Part of us resists that. We want to have pure emotion, intense emotion, without any sort of commentary. But we have to remember that our actions are part of a causal process. They come from causes but they also have effects. If we simply indulge in a feeling because it feels good, often the results will be things that we're going to later regret. So you have to be willing to watch yourself. If you try to deny the emotion, of course, what happens to it? It goes underground. It becomes The Thing. You saw that movie didn't you? A flying saucer that crashes into Antarctica and leaves little tiny bits of cellular life left over from some other

planet. If any of those bits get into your system, they take over your body and all of a sudden—blah!—there goes The Thing. It breaks out of your body and it's ugly and disgusting and looks like three million octopi. That's usually what seems to happen to our emotions when we deny them. They go underground and then come exploding out.

Mindfulness is very much against denial. You want to be present to things as they arise. Instead of being judgmental about them, you want to be judicious. It's an important distinction. Learn how to look at the emotion as it comes up, and what exactly are the result of indulging in the emotion. Sometimes it's an important process you have to go through in order to get in touch with exactly what the emotions are, and sometimes they have important messages for you.

But then there could also come a point where it gets indulgent. I had a student years back who had gone to psychotherapy one point and had been able to retrieve a memory of a time when she was three years old, and her parents had gone out of the house for an hour while she was napping. She happened to wake up while they were still away, and she went through this extreme terror. She thought her parents had abandoned her. And she was convinced now that there were still some of that grief left in her system, and she wanted to get it out. So she came to the monastery and asked for three months in order to go through her grieving process, to try to get back in touch with that grief. I tried to convince her, "I think you've probably already worked through it." But it took her three months to decide, yeah, she had already worked through it a long time ago.

So there comes a time when grief is self-indulgent. You have to look at it from the Buddhist point of view. Grief has a strong side. There's going to be a strong sense of "I" in there. The "I" that is wounded, the "I" that's upset, the "I" that feels unfairly treated. And an important way to deal with that is to open yourself up to the pain of other people as well, so that you see that you're not the only person who's suffering, you're not the only person who's meeting with events like this, events that cause sorrow.

As you examine the idea that you've been unfairly treated, you realize: This is the way the whole world is. There's death and dying and disease, people being separated from their loved ones: This happens all the time. Apparently 250,000 people die every day. So it's all over the place. Try to keep that perspective in mind as well.

What you're doing as you're meditating is trying to put the mind in a position where it can actually look at these things as they arise. After you begin to parse them, take them apart, bit by bit by bit, you get quicker at sensing where the skillful thought processes are and where the unskillful ones are. Then you can start

dealing in real-time again. And again what you do is that you don't take abstract memories of one thing being good or one thing being bad, but you get a more and more intuitive sense of what's skillful and what's not as it happens. You're able to read your intentions as they arise. In that way, it's not a question of going with your feelings *or* having to analyze things. It's learning how to put both of those processes together, so that you're quick enough to sense your feeling and also alert enough to see which parts of the feeling are actually skillful and which parts of the feeling are not. That makes it a lot easier to make your decision in real-time.

So the insights that arise from meditation: It's not a matter of memorizing things. This is one of the problems of translating *pañña*, the word for discernment, as "wisdom." We tend to think of wisdom as being wise sayings, and you can memorize lots and lots of wise sayings, but then the wise question is: When are they relevant? Discernment is a matter of seeing things as they actually arise, seeing what's skillful and what's unskillful as they arise, and that gives you the ability to act more quickly.

So again, it's learning a problem-solving method, learning a decision-making method: This is what the meditation is for. I had a friend, a student back in California, who had been to a retreat. And the issue came up at the end of the retreat—as it always does after a retreat—was how do you take these teachings back into real life? The teacher had said to everyone, "Learn to view your daily life as an interplay between the absolute and the relative."

Now that's about as abstract as you can get—and as unhelpful as you can get. She tried for a whole week to see her life as an interplay of the absolute and the relative. She had a question for me at the end of the week, and the question was so convoluted that I couldn't follow what it was. But I could see what the problem was: She was dealing with abstractions. So, in a roundabout way, I tried to point this out to her: that the more the mind is dealing in abstractions, the easier it is for the mind to lie to itself.

We always have that uneasy relationship with abstract teachings. There are times when we want to hear a convenient abstract teaching that we can carry into our lives, and then there's part of us that rebels. The mind goes back-and-forth, wanting an outside authority and then not wanting *any* outside authority.

So the best gift we can get from the retreat is to learn how to recognize what's a skillful choice, what's an unskillful choice, as we are faced with these things, learning how to look at the particulars, learning how to sense the little things going on in the mind that are signals that say, "This isn't skillful choice. We're coming from a skillful place or we're coming from an unskillful place."

This is why a good state of concentration is so valuable, because it puts you in a position where you can see for yourself, and you don't have to depend on anyone's abstractions. You don't have to depend on your own abstractions, because you've learned to take the present moment apart to the extent that you can begin to sense the signs of what's a skillful intention, what's an unskillful intention.

So keep reminding yourself that this is why we're practicing. We're trying to put ourselves in the same place where the Buddha was: a mind settled in good strong concentration, where mindfulness and equanimity become pure. Or you have the alertness and the mindfulness you need. The mindfulness is to keep in mind that you always want to do the skillful thing, always want to go with the skillful intention. The alertness is to see, "Okay, what are the signs by which I can tell which is skillful and which is unskillful?" You want the insight to see things as they arise and the mental stability that you don't have to go flowing along with them. Because if we're always going in the flow, we never know what's moving and what's not.

Ajaan Lee had a good analogy one time. He said, it's like being born on a train. You ride in the train all your life. You look out the windows, and everything moves. People move, cars move, houses move, trees move, mountains move. You can't tell what's *not* moving because you're always moving. If you want to see what's not moving, you have to make yourself still. In other words, stop the train. Get off. Stand still on the ground. Then you can see clearly.

When you're in that position, you can see for yourself which desires are skillful, which ones are unskillful. The question doesn't matter whether you like them or not. You see them clearly as part of a causal process. You see where they're coming from, you see where they're going. And you're the one who gets to decide: Do you really want to go there?

You can make a comparison with the story about the goose that lays the golden eggs. A good stable mind, clear and alert, is the goose. The insights are golden eggs. And it's like a fairy tale. You know what happens when you try to keep gold in fairy tale. You stash it away, and it turned into feathers or coal. If you try to keep your insights, make abstract rules for yourself, then after a day or two, and you look at them, and they're feathers and coal. But if you try to maintain the state of mind that gave you those insights, then you've got gold all the time. A situation comes up, you see what's going on, you can make the right decision, and that's it. You drop the insight. Maintain that state of mind for the next decision, and then the next, then the next. That way, you're always producing gold instead of hoarding feathers and coal.

There are basically two kinds of teachers: the teachers who like to tell you what to do all the time, and the teachers who like to throw you back on yourself. The Buddha was the kind of teacher who throws you back on yourself—but before he does that, he’s going to give you some training so that you can really can rely on yourself. He says, “This is how you do it. Focus the mind in the four establishments of mindfulness”—that formula we went through this morning: staying focused on the body in and of itself—ardent, alert and mindful—putting aside greed and distress with the world. That’s one of the four frames of reference. You develop that in such a way that you also develop concentration, unification of the mind, stability, steadiness. That state of the mind is the goose that lays the golden eggs.

Or to follow Ajaan Lee’s analogy, it’s like having four acres of land. Instead of having to run around asking other people for food, you can just cultivate your own land. When the food comes up, you find you have more than enough food for yourself, and you can also give advice to other people how they can cultivate their land, too.

So instead of running around with a lot of abstract notions... This is what they’re getting at with the issue of beginner’s mind. Beginner’s mind is one who’s clearly ready to see each situation as it arises without a lot of preconceived abstractions getting in the way. If you were a total beginner, though, you’d really in bad shape. You also want to have the kind of beginner’s mind who has had training. This is where it differs from the Zen teaching. You have an approach. You have a state of mind from which you can see things clearly.

I had a friend who was learning pottery in Japan. She got to study with a potter who was one of those living national treasures they have in Japan. She was getting quite depressed. She’d put her pots into kiln, and the next day they would take out the pots, and some of them were nice, but a lot of them were broken or burned or fired improperly. And she looked at her teacher: Every day he’d come in, and his pots would come up perfect, perfect, perfect every day. Until one day, she came in early and saw that the teacher’s batch had been ruined, and he was in the kiln, trying to figure out what had gone wrong. That’s why he was a living national treasure. It wasn’t that he was always perfect. When things didn’t come out perfectly, he was always willing to learn.

So it’s that combination of knowing the right approach, learning to be more and more sensitive to the right thing in the present moment, and always being willing to learn: Maybe there’s something new that you haven’t quite mastered yet, so that when you do make a decision and it comes out wrong, you want to learn. It may have been that you were sensitive to the wrong things, it may have been that your mind wasn’t quite as concentrated as it should have been, or you

weren't as alert as you could have been. But you don't regard a mistake as the end of the world. It's another opportunity to learn.

It's interesting that the term for someone who's reached stream entry—the first glimpse of nibbāna—is that the person is called a learner, someone who is finally really willing learn, and in the best position to learn.

So look at the meditation practice as the process of developing your skill. And in the course of this training, in course of mastering the skill, you will have to slow things down, look at things that you would rather not look at. Look at your impulses, look at your ideas, and really try to put yourself in the proper position where you can gauge them accurately: When there's an impulse like this, the reason it's coming out so fast is because it has an immediate understanding, or is it fast because it's trying to pull one over your eyes? A lot of quick decisions are like that, trying to push something past you.

Think of your mind as a committee, and it's not an ordinary committee. It's like the Chicago City Council. Sometimes the impulse will say, "We know this is the right thing," but that's because Karl Rove is behind it—or the Chicago equivalent, okay? And other times you know because you know. But it's only when you go through the training like this that you can begin to sort it out. Put the mind in a position where it *can* step back and look at your thought. As the Buddha said, see which ones are skillful, see which ones are unskillful. Learn to recognize the signs. Learn from trial and error. Then you can speed things back up to real-time again.