

The Adventure in the Present

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We're here to train the mind, because as the Buddha said, it's when the mind is well trained that you find happiness. If your mind isn't trained, it's like a puppy that hasn't been trained. No matter how beautiful your house may be, the puppy can make a mess anywhere. In other words, no matter how well things may go outside in your life, if your mind is not in good shape, you can make a mess of whatever you've got.

But you notice that we train the mind by focusing on the breath. It's because you can't, in the beginning of the practice, look directly at your mind. It's like a light beam. If the light beam doesn't reflect off anything, you wouldn't know that it's there.

So we focus our attention on the breath as our reflector. Make the breath a comfortable place to stay. Take the whole flow of energy through the body as your object. Wherever it's most obvious or feels comfortable to stay focused, and the breath energy feels most comfortable, stay right there. Then see if you can make it *more* comfortable. When you do, you benefit both ways: The body gets more comfortable, and the mind has a better place to stay. It is possible to focus the mind on pains, and there are stages in the practice where you've got to do that, but unless the mind first has a comfortable place to take a stance, it's not going to stay with the pain very long. It's going to resist.

You overcome that resistance by experimenting with the breath, seeing what works in improving the breath, seeing what doesn't work, what kind of breathing feels good right now, what kind of breathing doesn't. Choose to stick with whatever rhythm or texture of breathing feels best. You can conceive of it coming in and out of the body in lots of different ways, not just in and out of the nose. Think of it flowing through the energy channels all around the body, all the way out through the pores. Whatever way of focusing on the breath, whatever way of conceiving the breath feels best, gives the best results, you use that.

This is a basic principle in all the Buddha's teachings: You experiment to see what works and what doesn't work, then you learn from your experiments. It's a very reasonable-sounding principle, but many of us aren't comfortable with it. We'd like to have sure-fire instructions for immediate revelations, instant awakenings, something that changes us into a totally different person. But the Buddha basically says: Don't think in those terms. Don't think of what kind of person you are. Awakening is not a question of looking into your real nature,

because the Buddha always leaves the question of your real nature unanswered. It's not the issue. The real question is: What are you doing that's causing suffering? In other words, you don't look at yourself in terms of what you are or think you are, you just look at what you're *doing*. Then you learn from what you're doing. Notice your intentions; notice the action on that intention; notice the results. Wherever there's any harm or suffering in that sequence, you just don't do that again. You learn from your mistakes.

Gradually, over time, you get more and more sensitive. In an impatient world, that's not necessarily welcome news, but it's the news we need to hear: that the best things in life come from paying careful attention to what you're doing. And it's a continual process, a gradual process. The image the Buddha gave of the practice is of the continental shelf off of India: a gradual slope and then a sudden drop-off. We all want the sudden drop-off, but it doesn't come unless you go through the gradual slope first.

Why is that? Well, everything you need to know is right here. It's just that you need to develop your powers of awareness to see your actions, to see their results, and to get more and more sensitive to where something works or where it doesn't work. That's the gradual part of the path. As you develop your powers of discernment and sensitivity through repeated action, repeated reflection, repeated observation, your sensitivity finally reaches a point where it really does open up suddenly to something deathless, something other.

So it's not a distraction to keep focusing on what you're doing and the results of what you're doing. Many of us don't like looking at those things. We don't like seeing our own mistakes, but there's no other way you're going to learn. Just remind yourself that everybody makes mistakes. Even the Buddha started out making mistakes—big mistakes: all those years of sensual indulgence, followed by the opposite extreme, six years of self torment, self affliction, thinking that somehow if you created enough suffering in the body, that would burn away all the impurities of the mind. Well, that doesn't work, because the issue is not the body. The issue is the mind. But the Buddha had to make those mistakes before he was able to find the middle way.

And it wasn't the case that after six years of really strong effort, he just gave up and said, "Well, effort doesn't get anywhere. Let's have a practice of no effort." Fortunately, he didn't go in that direction. If he had, we probably wouldn't remember him, because there have been lots and lots of other teachers who have taught that over time. It may seem appealing, but it doesn't really go anywhere.

In one of the suttas, the Buddha talks about someone who's trying to get milk out of a cow. The person might try twisting the horn of the cow to get the milk

out. He twists and twists and twists, really tormenting the cow, but doesn't get any milk. He might come to the conclusion that human effort doesn't work in getting milk out of cows. But that's obviously not right. He was just twisting the wrong thing. If he pulled the udder of cow, he'd get the milk. In other words, you have to make the effort at the right spot.

Here in training the mind, the right spot is your intention at any given moment. This is the one thing in the present moment that really is free. Other things you experience through your senses, random thoughts popping up in the mind: Those things come from past actions. You can't do much about your past actions, but you *can* make a difference in what you're doing in the present, what your intentions are in the present.

That fact should attract your attention: Why is it that your intentions are potentially free? What is this potential for freedom right here? Look into it. And the best way to look into it is to try to gain some control over your intentions by making them more and more skillful. Whatever the situation you're faced with, ask yourself: "What is the most skillful thing to do right here? What is the most skillful thing to say? What is the most skillful thing to think?" It's not a question of, "Given the person I am, what am I likely to think?" That doesn't go anywhere. Or just reacting to things out of habit: That doesn't teach you anything new, either. Just keep asking yourself: "What would be the most skillful thing to do or say? It might be unexpected. It might be unusual for you to do or say that, but give it a try. See what happens.

And greet your mistakes with good cheer. In other words, don't be happy you made a mistake, but at least be willing to admit when you've made a mistake and say, "Okay, I've learned that lesson, not to do that again." Then take it as a challenge to try something different the next time around.

This is one of the reasons why we spend so much time practicing concentration, because this is directly a training of your intentions. You intend to stay with the breath and then you keep intending to maintain that intention. In the course of that, you see other intentions coming up. That's the whole point. You want to see those intentions, because in the past they slipped in and slipped out without your knowing it. They came in, did their dirty work, and then ran away. All you saw were the results. You wondered where they came from.

This happens because many of your intentions function on a semi-conscious level. What we're trying to do here is to bring the whole issue of intention up into the foreground. You intend to stay with the breath, and then you deal with all the distractions and other intentions that would pull you off to other places.

So you learn how to maintain that original intention. This shows you that if you really make up your mind to be more skillful, to be more conscious and deliberate in your intentions, you can do it. And you get good results. The mind feels more solid. It's less harassed by random things, and you get a greater sense of your power in the present moment. The range of your freedom in the present moment grows larger. Then you apply this new understanding, this new awareness of the mind, to other situations as well.

In this way, your life becomes an adventure in learning. Make up your mind that whatever the situation, you'll try to do the most skillful thing possible. And then keep learning, so that you can become more skillful, and then more skillful, more sensitive to what it means to be skillful. As that sensitivity develops, as I said, you begin to see subtler intentions in the mind, subtler things going on. You peel away these layers of delusion, these layers of ignorance, and then the mind will begin to open up to something special. And you know exactly how it happens. You know exactly what you did to get that result.

When you do have your first taste of the deathless, one of the things it confirms in you is an understanding of what human action is, what the power of intention is. This is one of the reasons why people who've tasted that first level of awakening would not dare overstep the precepts. They know that acting on an unskillful intention really does cause harm down the line. And when you know that, why would you intentionally do anything harmful?

It also lets them see that there is something in the range of awareness that goes beyond our sense of who we are. This is why the Buddha was never really interested in the question of who we are or what our real nature is, because whatever you can see yourself as, it's a limitation. So the experience teaches you not to assume what you are. You simply look at what you're doing, what the results are.

At the same time, this experience ends your doubts about the Buddha. You realize that when he talked about the deathless, he really meant what he said. He wasn't just talking in a metaphorical way or just shooting the breeze. He had had a direct experience of the deathless and it really did free him from suffering. You know because you follow the path that he taught and you've seen that there is a dimension where there is no suffering.

This is much more valuable than anything else you can do, anything else you can discover in life. So it's worth your while to pay a lot of attention here, to take on this exercise, this adventure in learning to be skillful in doing the most skillful thing, saying most skillful thing, thinking the most skillful thing in any given situation. The practice of concentration and mindfulness helps give the mind the

power and the refreshment it needs to be up for that adventure, so that it's not onerous, it's not drudgery. It's fun. It's a challenge that you enjoy trying to meet—because the more you do meet it, the more the mind gains a sense of well-being, a sense of inner worth, and the better everything is in your life all around.

So pay attention right here, because this is where all the important things in life are being decided. And make sure that you're helping to make the decisions as skillful as possible.