

Make the Most of What You've Got

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When the Buddha taught meditation to his son, Rāhula, he started with some lessons in patience and equanimity. He said, “Make your mind like earth. When people throw disgusting things on the earth, throw trash on the earth, the earth doesn’t pull away in disgust.

“Make your mind like water,” he said. “When people use water to wash away disgusting things, the water isn’t disgusted. Make your mind like fire. When fire is used to burn trash, it doesn’t get disgusted. Make your mind like wind. When wind blows trash around, it doesn’t get disgusted.”

In other words, the beginning lessons are simply learning to accept things as they are and not get worked up over things. The fact that there’s trash in the world is something that just is. You have to accept that. The fact that there’s trash in your mind is something you have to accept to begin with. But you don’t stop there—and the Buddha didn’t stop there.

He went on to teach Rāhula breath meditation, which is a very active process. In other words, you accept things as they are so that you can watch them, observe them, and learn from the way they are. Then you can make something out of them.

It’s like learning how to make things out of clay. If you don’t accept the nature of clay—if you don’t try to get into the clay and figure out what clay can do and cannot do—then you’re never going to be a good potter. You’re never going to be able to make ceramics. You have to accept your medium before you can make something good out of it. After all, that’s what the word *bhāvanā* means. It’s the Pali word for meditation, but it means to make something, to bring something into being, to make it become.

The Buddha said that this is one of the duties of mindfulness. There’s a sutta where he talks about putting mindfulness in charge or making it your governing principle. He said if there’s anything that needs to be perfected in your behavior, your concentration, or your discernment, you bring it into being. When something good has come into being, you try to make sure it doesn’t fall away. You try to make sure that it continues and develops.

This is different from what we normally hear about meditation. For most of us, meditation is back there in that first step, just learning how to accept things as they are. But when you actually move on in the meditation, you realize that mindfulness is not just equanimity or remembering to be equanimous. It means

remembering that there are things to abandon and there are things to develop—and once they’ve developed, you want to bring them to the culmination of their development.

This relates to the word “becoming.” As the Buddha said, all our desires for becoming lead to suffering, but he also uses becoming on the path. This is very typical of his strategies. There are many things that you use as you’re on your path that you then discard when you reach the goal. It’s like making a chair or a set of drawers. While you’re doing it, you have to carry your saw. You have to have your hammer. You have to have all the tools that a carpenter would need. But then when it’s done, you put the tools down. You don’t carry them around.

So we bring the mind into a state of concentration, which is the best sort of becoming for observing the processes of becoming in the mind, and that’s for several reasons. It’s creating a state of stillness. You’re letting go of unskillful qualities. You got the mind to a point where it’s not interested in sensuality. It’s not interested in anything unskillful. It’s devoted to its one topic. We’re thinking about the breath. We’re evaluating the breath to make the breath into a good place to stay.

So notice as you’re breathing in and out: What kind of breathing feels good for the body right now? Does your body need long breathing or short breathing, heavy or light, fast or slow, deep or shallow? Experiment for a while to get in touch with what the body needs, and then provide it with what it needs. As long as that kind of breathing feels good, keep it up. If it doesn’t feel good anymore, if the needs of the body change, then you change the breathing. You’re trying to create a sense of well-being right here in the body that the mind can gather around and become something good. You make something of yourself here.

That’s again what *bhāvanā* means: to make something out of this. You take the basic raw material like the breath, and first you have to learn about it. There are certain things the breath can do, and there are certain things it can’t do for the body. You learn that by exploring. With some pains, if you breathe in a particular way, the pains get worse. If you breathe in another way, they go away. With other pains, the breath has nothing to do with them. They’re just there.

How do you learn this? You learn by experimenting; you learn by trial and error, by trial and success. We’re bringing the mind into a state of being because we want a state that’s still and stable and solid so that, on the one hand, you can see the process of becoming as you’re making something of the mind here. On the other hand, you’re in a good position to see other kinds of becoming come up in the mind.

And what is becoming? It operates on several levels. The closest to us is the fact that we've got this body here. This is something that has become out of our past karma. There are also states of becoming in the mind—in other words, thought worlds. You can visualize San Francisco; you can visualize New York; you can visualize the middle of Canada. Then you can put yourself in that visualization. That's taking birth in a state of becoming. You can think about having some ice cream, and then you take on the identity of someone who wants the ice cream, who can figure out how to get it, and who will then will enjoy the ice cream. In other words, you have a sense of yourself there as a consumer of some particular pleasure and as the producer who has the ability to make that happen.

But if your concentration is solid and still, and there's a good sense of well-being in the concentration, you can look at these other states of becoming and have a sense of dispassion for them. They don't have the pull that they would normally have. If you're feeling hungry and depleted, it's very easy to come up with a desire for this, that, or the other thing—for more ice cream, for more pie, for more coffee or whatever—and to take on the identity of an ice cream eater, a coffee drinker, or whatever, because it has some appeal. You feel a lack, so you want to make up that sense of lack. So try to fill in the lack skillfully, with a sense of well-being that comes from learning how to sit here and breathe properly. It feels nourishing right here, right now.

This is learning how to develop a state of becoming for the sake of understanding and going beyond becoming. In other words, first you learn how to see through the thought worlds of the mind that would pull you away. When you've worked on them, and you find that some have a stronger pull than others—a deeper pull—they'll take more time to deal with. Some of them, you simply have to put aside for the time being, realizing that you can't outwit them. Others are easier to deal with.

The one that you deal with last, of course, is going to be the state of becoming you're creating with the concentration. That's something you maintain for the time being. It's only at the level of non-returning that you really perfect this state of becoming. Only with the level of arahantship are you going to go beyond any passion for it.

So in the meantime, learn how to *want* to do this. This is a desire that's part of the path. After all, desire plays a part in right effort; right effort leads to right mindfulness; right mindfulness leads to right concentration. There's got to be a desire to get the mind to settle down for it to actually work. This is a desire you use for the sake of overcoming desire, creating a state of becoming that you use in

order to overcome your passion and thirst for becoming. This is the Buddha's strategy.

So teach the mind to become something good. In other words, learn how to accept what you've got here. You've got a body that has some pains here and there. You've got this breath that has the potential to do things for the body to help make the pains go away or easier to bear. And you look at how skillful you are at dealing with the breath and settling down with the breath. That much you learn how to accept. But you don't accept it to stop there; you accept it so you can figure out what to do with it.

Again, it's like being a carpenter. If you're working with cherry, there are certain things you have to accept about cherry wood. If you're working with black walnut, there are certain things you have to accept about black walnut. That doesn't mean you just sit there with the black walnut in your shop. You work around its difficulties. It'll prevent you from making some things out of it, but you'll find there are other things that you *can* make out of it.

The nature of the breath is something you can settle down with. You can adjust it. There are other parts of the body that you can't adjust. Or if you're going to adjust them, you have to adjust them *through* the breath. So you accept these facts. Then you work with them to make something really good: a sense of belonging right here, a sense of being comfortable in your own body, comfortable with the potentials that you've got, because every human being has what it takes. You've got a body; you've got awareness; you've got your desires; and you've got your states of becoming, and you can turn all those things into the path.

You look at the Buddha's teachings on dependent co-arising, his teachings on how suffering arises, how stress arises, and they're pretty complex. But one of the basic features is that everything starts with ignorance. You fabricate your experience in ignorance. This is one of the habits of the mind: It keeps making things all the time. "Fabricating" here doesn't mean that you lie. It's simply that you make things out of what you've got: out of the breath, out of your ability to talk to yourself, your ability to think, to identify things, and to have feelings. You realize that if you do it out of ignorance, you're going to suffer. But if you do it with knowledge, you can actually turn those fabrications into the path.

After all, the path itself is a kind of fabrication—the ultimate fabricated dhamma, the Buddha said. It can take you to something unfabricated, which means it doesn't create the goal, but it takes you there. Just like the road to the ocean doesn't create the ocean, but if you follow it, you get there. You don't pick up the road behind you as you go along, but you use it.

So remember that we're working strategically here, making the best use of what we've got so that it can take us to something better—something that can't be made at all, but something that's really worth discovering inside.