

Undirected Insight

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Coming out to a place like this is very important for the mind, because the mind needs time to get away from its day-to-day issues. The affairs of daily life are like wind blowing across the surface of water. When the water is all ruffled up by the wind, you can't see what lies beneath the surface. So you have to come out to a place like this where there are not that many issues going on, just the very basic issues of keeping the body alive—walking when you need to walk, sitting when you need to sit—so that the affairs of the mind can come more and more to the forefront, so you can stop the wind ruffling the water. The surface of the water calms down and gets still. Clear and smooth. Then you can look down inside, into the mind.

And whatever the mind has to show, it's going to show at its own pace, in its own way. We may have come to the meditation with the idea that we'd like to deal with a particular problem, get something straightened out, or that we're going to force the practice to go in certain stages and certain steps in line with what we've read. But as Ajaan Fuang said, "The mind has its own stages, its own steps." Or as Ajaan Lee said, "The ways of the mind are so complex you could never put them into a book."

So we have a very simple technique: You focus on the breath. Be alert and mindful, and stay with the basic technique. When you do that over and over again, the things that are going to come up in the mind will come up, bit by bit, revealing themselves at their own pace. This is where patience comes into the practice. There are some issues you'd like to have dealt with right away, but they don't come up. The mind isn't ready to handle them. So you just chip away at the basic technique.

When things come in their own way, it's like sanding wood: You polish the wood in order to bring out the grain that's already there. If you have preconceived notions of what you'd like the grain to look like and try to paint those designs on the wood, you end up not getting anything that looks natural. You cover up the actual grain. But if you simply polish the wood without any preconceived notions beyond the act of polishing, the natural grain of the wood will come out. The same with meditation: In the process of keeping the mind with the breath, you learn a lot of important things about the body and mind, many of which you didn't expect.

This is why we always have to be open to whatever comes up in the course of the meditation—whatever insights, whatever realizations, whatever issues arise—because often the things that come up are more valuable than what you thought you were looking for. If you're too busy looking for something else, you won't see what's actually there. So meditation is training in learning to be very patient with the mind, to be open with it and to see—as you subject the mind to the training—what traits, what characteristics it shows to you. And you've got the basic technique to deal with whatever comes up.

Often what comes up is distraction, which we often find frustrating, but there are a lot of important lessons right there in that process of bringing the mind back. A lot of times we want to be done with it—“When is this problem going to stop?”—because we want to get on to the important stuff. Well, distraction itself is a very important issue. We've got to learn how to master bringing the mind back, because in doing that you learn an awful lot about the mind, a lot of unexpected things about how the mind slips off the breath, how it avoids certain issues, how it cooks up other issues to get in the way of seeing things it just doesn't want to see. And in the simple process of bringing the mind back, trying to be mindful, trying to be alert, you catch sight of things you didn't see before. They used to be in the blind spots, but now you begin to catch them out of the corner of your eye as you keep at this very simple process.

As the Buddha said, learning how to deal with the process of distraction can take you all the way to arahantship, when you've really mastered how to do it, when you're really good at it. This is a lot of what the Buddha's teachings are like: just very simple techniques, very simple things to do with the mind, and the unexpected realizations that come up in the course of doing the technique.

This is one of the reasons why you can't map out the ways of the mind. At the same time, though, you shouldn't believe that blindly following the instructions in the meditation is going to be enough. You've got to be as observant as possible, all around. That's why we sometimes say, “You've got to play with the meditation.” You've got to have a sense of experimentation because often the things you catch out of the corner of your eye as you're working with a technique are the important realizations. Those are the things that make a real difference.

So when you sit down and meditate—even though you've seen the steps of the path laid out, you may have a general idea of what it's all about and where it's going—still, you've got to put that knowledge aside. We're here training the mind, and yet the mind is both trainer and trainee. The map is for the trainer side of the mind—just so you know in general where you're headed, where you're going—but when the mind itself is being trained you have to put the map aside and just see what's right there in the present as it comes up. And in the course of

dealing with the practice, a lot of unexpected things do come up, and you have to be ready for them, notice them as they come, whether they're the things you want to deal with or not.

So stick with your basic technique, but keep your range of vision broad.

And don't try to define things too heavily in advance. The purpose of the meditation is to become more and more familiar with the ways of the mind. The knowledge that comes with familiarity goes very deep but it comes in little increments. It's like getting to know a person. You can't just walk up to someone and smile and shake hands and become friends. You can be friendly at the beginning, but actually becoming friends takes time—to get to know the person's strengths and weaknesses, sense of humor, the areas where you can trust him, the areas where you can't. All these forms of knowledge come in a very indirect way. When unexpected events arise and you begin to see that person in a different light—how he behaves in an emergency, how he behaves when you're in trouble: This is how you get to know the other person. It takes time.

The same with the mind. You focus on the basic technique of keeping with the breath, and eventually you stumble over some really important veins in the mind. They may be veins of gold, veins of diamond, or an old layer of garbage that got laid down sometime way back in the past. But the basic technique is just being here, being observant, watching what happens, and the things will come out layer by layer by layer as they were laid down.

So when you meditate you can't sit down and say, "Okay, this particular session I'm going to understand dependent co-arising. I'm going to understand my childhood hang-ups." That doesn't get you anywhere. Just tell yourself, "For this breath I'm going to be right here. I'm going to be mindful. I'm going to try to settle down with the breath as well as I can."

There are parts of the meditation you can will, which is why the Buddha talks about them. For example, the type of awareness you have: You can will to be aware of the whole body as you breathe in; you can will to be aware of the whole body as you breathe out. You can will to let the breath grow calm. You can will to focus your attention on pleasure or rapture or wherever you want to focus it in regard to the breath. Those are things you can will.

That's the difference between concentration and insight. Concentration is a matter of using your will. It's fabricated, as the Buddha says. But insight is something you can't will. Even though you tell yourself "I'm going to be very carefully noting this and noting that," that's a very precise form of concentration. It's not *vipassana*; it's not insight.

The insight is the understanding that comes when you suddenly see things right in front of you, and many times it's not what you were told you were going to see. And the real test as to whether it's genuine insight is if it brings the mind

to peace. Even when it's genuine insight, you have to let it go when it has done its work and just go back to the technique. If it's something that really makes a big difference in the mind, it can't help but make a difference in the mind. You don't have to memorize it, you don't have to jot it down, you don't have to try to make yourself see things in that light from then on in. That's a false kind of insight, in which your perceptions cover up the possibility of any new insight's arising right after them.

So whatever comes up in the practice, you take note of it and let it pass. If it's important, it'll shift the ground under your feet. If it's not, then why bother with it? Just let it go. Your one job is to stick with the basic steps of the practice.

This is why the Buddha's meditation instructions are so very simple. He focuses on how you breathe, where you focus your attention, what range of awareness you develop. That's pretty much all the instruction he gives. He gives a few warnings about some of the issues that'll come up and how you should contemplate them. If anything comes up, you contemplate it as being impermanent, as being stressful. Sometimes some very delightful, exquisite sensations come up, and you've got to stay with them until you see where even they are stressful, even they can be a burden. Then you can let them go.

If particular problems come up—things like lust, anger, or delusion; sleepiness, restlessness and anxiety, uncertainty—the Buddha has particular techniques for dealing with them. But then he has you get back to the breath when the issue has passed, for this is your home base.

The breath, he said, is the most refreshing form of meditation. He compared it to the first rain storm of the rainy season. If you've ever been in Asia during the hot season, you know what it's like when the first rains come. There's been dust in the air for months and months, along with the oppressiveness of the heat. All of a sudden the rain comes and washes everything, cools everything off. The air is suddenly clear like it hasn't been for months. That's the image the Buddha gives for breath meditation. When the breath is refreshing, it'll wash away all unskillful states. So you want to keep the breath as your home base. It may seem a little bit too simple, but that's just the verdict coming from the part of the mind that's planning things and figuring things out in advance.

So just stick with it, stick with it, stick with the breath. And what's going to come up is going to come up. It may come up in little bits and pieces, but it comes up as your own insight. Using your own insight is a lot better than using the insight you get in books, because those things are borrowed. You're not always sure you're using them at the right time or in the right place. But when the mind gets to the point where you've polished it with the breath, the insights that arise can be just right for the time and place. And you can test them right there to see if they are. It's a very natural process. It's a process that allows the

mind to see clearly into itself, whatever is there. Just don't try to plan things in advance, because you have to remember we're all operating from ignorance, and our plans and designs on the practice come from ignorance as well.

So you give yourself the technique with a minimum of planning and a minimum of designing. When you stick with that, the things that couldn't come out before, that didn't have the opening, can arise within the mind, at their own pace, in their own time. And they're more likely to be useful and true.