

Today Is Better than Yesterday

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At Wat Dhammasathit there would be traveling salesmen who would come through in the afternoon. Sometimes they'd be selling big water jars, sometimes salt. The most memorable was a guy who would come in fairly regularly selling Chinese dumplings. He would get on his loudspeaker as he was driving down the road and announce, "Today's dumplings are better than yesterday's." And the next day he'd come back: "Today's dumplings are better than yesterday's." He kept this up day after day. You began to wonder when he was going to reach the platonic ideal of dumplings. But someone pointed out to me one time: "Well where are yesterday's dumplings right now? If they're not down in your intestines, they are probably down in your cesspool. So, yes, today's dumplings are better than yesterday's."

And it's a good attitude to have towards your meditation as well. Today's meditation is better than yesterday's. Yesterday's is gone. And even though it may seem like you had some great meditations in the past and your current meditation couldn't compare, this is the meditation you're working with. And if the past ones really were all that good, well, they've left you high and dry. So maybe they weren't so good after all.

So how do you deal with that when it seems that the mind is not settling down the way it used to, or the breath isn't as comfortable. On the one hand, you have to forget yesterday's meditation. On the other hand, though, you have to remember. In other words, the forgetting is that you're not trying to look at yesterday's breath, you're trying to look at today's breath, and your memories of yesterday's breath and yesterday's meditation are going to get in the way of seeing what's actually happening with the breath right here, right now. So in that way you have to forget, wipe the slate clean. Try to come to the meditation with the same attitude of exploration that you first had when you first started meditating. Because all your problems right now may be the "old hat" problem. Everything seems to be kind of old, and you're not expecting too much anymore, and so you don't feel all that encouraged to put in much effort or to pay a lot of attention.

So the cynical attitude in the mind is one you've got to put aside. You've got this breath right here, right now: How can you make the most of it? And remember where that cynical attitude came from. It came from the fact that yesterday's meditation was really good, or that maybe last year's meditation was really good, and in the meantime things have not been so good. So you get cynical

about the whole process: i.e., no matter how good things may get, you're going to go back to the old ways, the way you were before. And that saps your strength.

As for the part to remember: Try to remember what worked in the past, and give it a try. What kind of breathing was most centering? Where were you focused that seemed to get the best results? And if nothing seems to work, remember the lessons you learned about how to explore: i.e., just to sit and not do anything for a little while, but with a questioning attitude. Just watch what the breath is going to do, and see if you can catch something new that you didn't see before.

In particular, learn the lesson of patience. The most fatal error you can make as a meditator is to be impatient. You want the results really fast. You do a little bit of the causes and then you say: "Okay, where are the results? I want the payback right now." That impatience is what does you in. You have to just stick with the breath, stick with it, stick with it, and don't let the cynical and lazy members of the committee take over.

Because this is another thing you've got to keep in mind, which is that the mind is like a committee. And although it may have been that a few of the members were meditating really well sometime in the past, a lot of the other members were not involved. Or they were withholding judgment for the time being and then they decided they didn't like it, so they started ganging up on the members that want to meditate. So you have got to learn how to deal with them.

This is where the Buddha's teachings on the five strengths comes useful. Because your cynical members, your lazy members, your forgetful members, your scatterbrained members, and your dumb members: Those are the ones who are getting in the way. In other words, the cynical members say: "This isn't going to work, it's not worth all the effort, don't bother."

The discussion then moves over to your lazy members, the ones who want pleasure right away without having to put in much effort.

And then there are the forgetful members, the ones who say: "Well, you can gain happiness in really quick, easy ways," but they forget what the long-term consequences of some of those quick, easy ways were.

And that goes to your scatterbrained members, ones that don't really follow through with anything.

And then finally the dumb members: They're not just dumb, they engage in a lot of denial. When you think about ignorance in the mind, it's not simply that you don't know. It's that there are parts of the mind that just don't want to admit the truth and so they find reasons for covering things up.

So to fight these members you need to conviction. That deals with the cynical members, telling them that, yes, the effort you put into the practice really does

make a difference. Maybe the results aren't there right away, but the conviction is what carries you through, reminding you that some things really do take time if they're going to be good. It also reminds you that if you don't follow this path, even though this path may seem long, the path of not practicing is a lot longer, and it involves a lot more suffering. But you can't think of that as a path, it's more like a slide downhill. That's where it goes, downhill. And so instead of asking, "How much longer is it going to be before I'm through with these defilements?" the question should be: "How much longer do I want to suffer? How much longer do I want to keep on suffering, to keep crying those tears that have exceeded the ocean already?" Conviction is what reminds you that this is the way out, and you've got to do it if it's going to get done.

And then you develop persistence, the quality of sticking with it, sticking with it. Regardless of whether the results are coming fast or slow, you just stick with it. So when the lazy dilettantes in your mind complain—and they'll have lots of very sophisticated reasons—you just refuse to give in.

And then you remember. As I said, there are some things you should want to forget and some things you should want to remember if you're on the path. You try to remember the lessons you learned from the past and then see if they apply right now.

And to see if they really apply, that's what requires your concentration. You stay focused right here, right here, right here, as continuously as you can. Because if your gaze is not continuous, there are going to be little gaps, and lots of important things can happen in those gaps. So you want to be with the breath all the way in, with the breath all the way out. When the mind wanders off, you want to bring it right back. Try to see through the gaps. Connect your moments of awareness, your moments of attention so that there's a continuous line.

This is why mindfulness and concentration have to go together. Mindfulness is what keeps reminding you to keep coming back, coming back. And concentration is the quality of solidity that comes when your mindfulness is good. In that way, you can start piercing through all the curtains of denial that the mind puts up, to see how it's been causing itself suffering, and how it doesn't have to. You see where your real burdens are, and you work with those. The things that are not really your burdens, not really your responsibilities, you're willing to put those aside. That's the strength of discernment.

One of the images in the Canon for discernment is of a fortress wall covered with plaster. In other words, it's smooth. Your defilements have no foothold to make inroads into the mind. And the only way you can make your mind smooth like that is to be as continually aware as possible, and to be especially leery of any

sweet-talking defilements, the ones who want to put a nice haze over things so that you really can't see what they're doing.

So these are the five strengths you need to stay focused right here, right now, and to develop that quality of patience. Impatience is what leads people to addiction. Impatience is what keeps people back. They just want a quick fix right now, right now, and when they come to meditation they want the results right now, right now. When they don't get the results, they go off someplace else. That's one of the big obstacles you've got to overcome.

To fight that impatience, you need a combination of your conviction that, yes, this is worth it; and your persistence, your willingness to stick right with it; and your mindfulness and concentration working together so that you can stay focused and use that focus to pierce through things, like a magnifying glass that focuses all the rays of the sun in one spot: You can set fire to little things that you couldn't have set fire to otherwise. You can burn a hole right through a piece of paper. In the same way, your mindfulness and concentration working together enable your discernment to pierce through all the flimsy arguments that greed, aversion, and delusion will churn out.

It's in this way that, regardless of how good yesterday's meditation was, today's meditation is going to be better. Not only because it's today's meditation, the one that you can actually work on, but also because there is progress. You are learning. And whether things are going well or not, those are the raw materials you've got to work with. But it's in the learning: That's where the progress in the meditation comes. And you need your mindfulness to remember those lessons so you can keep applying them and refining them as you go through this practice day by day.

The thing about this practice is that it does have a final point, unlike the other path that's not going to end unless you decide that you've had enough. So keep your focus right here, right now, and try to strengthen the good committee members so that the unskillful ones don't eat up your meditation. You're working on something solid here, something really important, so always keep that fact in mind.