

Analysis of Qualities

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We all come to the practice with doubts and questions. But we don't get past our doubts by not asking questions. It's more a matter of learning how to ask the right questions.

There's a passage where the Buddha talks about how to overcome doubt. He says it's by paying appropriate attention to the qualities of the mind to see whether they're skillful or not skillful, dark or bright. And that's the same approach he recommends for developing what's called analysis of qualities as a factor for awakening. You bring appropriate attention to qualities of mind to see whether they're skillful or not, dark or bright.

Now, analysis of qualities is the discernment factor in those factors for awakening. This means that you replace doubt not with belief but with discernment. In both cases—dealing with the doubt and developing the discernment—appropriate attention is how you do it. Appropriate attention is basically learning how to ask the right questions, focusing on the questions of what you're doing and the results of what you're doing.

The Buddha himself said he got on the right path by noticing that he could divide his thoughts into two sorts: those that were imbued with sensuality, ill will, or cruelty on the one hand, and those that were imbued with renunciation, non-ill will—i.e., good will—and harmlessness on the other. And he divided the thoughts into those categories not in terms of what he liked or didn't like, or what he found entertaining or instructive or interesting. Instead, the question was: Where do these thoughts lead? The unskillful side led to all kinds of unskillful behavior. The skillful side led to more skillful behavior.

So he decided to keep his unskillful thoughts in check in the same way that a cowherd keeps his cows in check during the rainy season. In Asia, during the rainy season when the rice is growing, you have to be very careful that your cows don't wander into the rice fields. Otherwise, they'll eat the rice and there'll be trouble. So if you see them heading toward the rice, you've got to check them, beat them back.

As for skillful thoughts, he saw no problem. In that case, it would be like the cows during the dry season. The rice has been harvested. There's no danger of getting into any rice fields, so you could let the cows wander where they like.

But even then, if you thought skillful thoughts for 24 hours, it would tire the mind. When the mind is tired, it's more likely to go back to unskillful thinking.

This is when he realized that he should bring his mind to concentration to get it still. But even getting the mind into concentration requires that you do some questioning. And here again, you apply appropriate attention.

When the Buddha discusses the factors for awakening, he says that they're fulfilled by following the 16 steps of breath meditation. And in the 16 steps, the questions of discernment have to do with, first, what is the state of your mind right now? Is it in balance or out of balance? If you find that it's out of balance, in which direction is it leaning? And what do you do to bring it back in line? For instance, if you're feeling depressed, irritated, or down, what can you do to gladden the mind? If the mind is scattered, what can you do to make it more solid?

The 16 steps also give you some advice on how to answer those questions. They require first, though, that you understand the process of fabrication in the present moment. Fabrication, *sankhara*, comes in three types: bodily, verbal, and mental. Bodily is the breath. Verbal is the way you talk to yourself before you break into speech. Technically, this is called directed thought and evaluation: directing your thoughts to an object and evaluating it—asking questions or commenting on it. Mental covers perceptions and feelings. Perceptions are the labels you apply to things. Feelings are feelings of pleasure, pain, or neither pleasure nor pain.

If you want to gladden the mind or steady the mind, to get rid of unskillful qualities and develop skillful ones, you have to work first with mental fabrications: your feelings and perceptions. What images do you hold in mind? The same as when you're dealing with the breath: What kind of image do you have of the breath? It's good to think of the breath as the energy flowing throughout the body, down through the nerves, down through the blood vessels, out to the tips of the fingers, out to the tips of the toes, all around, because that perception of the breath allows feelings of ease to spread easily through the body. It makes the body a more pleasant place to stay. When the body is pleasant, the mind gets into a better mood. It's not so irritable. And you can both gladden the mind and steady the mind by making the body feel pleasant through the breath.

So you've been working with all three kinds of fabrication there. First you have the perception. And then you work with bodily fabrication, the way you breathe based on that perception, and then you give rise to a feeling of pleasure. You allow that feeling to spread. In the meantime, you're talking to yourself about how to do this well. You're noticing what works, what doesn't work.

That's how you develop your discernment, and that's how you overcome doubt. Ajaan Fuang had a nice passage in one of his Dhamma talks where he said that if you have doubts about things, just ask yourself, "Is the breath coming in, is

the breath going out, or is it still?”—something that’s right there. And if you can doubt this, he said, you’re going to doubt everything in life. So at least you have something really sure right here that you can begin with.

You know what the breath is doing, but you still may not yet be so clear as to whether it’s comfortable or not. Well, you experiment. Try different ways of breathing. Try different ways of perceiving the breath, thinking of it coming in maybe not through the nose but through the eyes, the ears, down from the top of the head, coming in through the forehead, coming in from behind, coming into the back of the neck, going down the spine. When you think of the breath in those ways, what does it do to the sensation of breathing?

Or if you breathe in, you can think of the fact that even though the air is coming in through the nose and into the lungs, the energy that allows that to happen is actually spreading from within the body itself. It can spread from the area around the navel, the area around the breastbone—anyplace in the body, actually. And if you hold that perception in mind, how does it affect the way you breathe? Does it give rise to a sense of ease? If so, maintain that perception and maintain that kind of breathing. You find that it has a calming effect on the mind, gladdening it if it’s been feeling irritated, steadying it if it’s been feeling scattered.

At the same time, you’re beginning to understand the process by which you create your experience of the present moment through these processes of fabrication. It’s in this way that discernment can lead to concentration. That’s one of the basic patterns of the factors for awakening as a set: They start with mindfulness, and then discernment—the analysis of qualities factor—and they end up in concentration. They basically show how, starting with mindfulness, you use your discernment to get the mind to settle down, how discernment fosters concentration.

Now, the Buddha has other lists of teachings where things happen the other way around. You get the mind focused on establishing mindfulness and then you develop concentration and then the discernment comes. It can happen either way. Different people will find that different lists describe the way their minds work, and even one person will find that the processes of the mind can vary from day to day. The ultimate level, of course, is when discernment develops your concentration at the same time that concentration develops your discernment.

So even though these factors in the different lists come in a row, the later factors turn around and help the ones earlier on in the list. In this way, they all work together to get the mind in the proper state where you have no doubts about what’s going on in the mind. You can see it clearly.

You begin to see it so clearly that you can understand how the mind creates unnecessary suffering for itself—because that’s the original question we’re trying answer as we follow the four noble truths: Why is there suffering? Because of craving. Where is the craving? The craving is in the mind. So the questions of appropriate attention come back to the questions of the four noble truths, the realization that we’re suffering not because of things outside, but because of things the mind is doing. And the meditation is to get us more sensitive to exactly what the mind is doing, where it’s skillful, where it’s not, so we can stop creating that suffering.

Discernment, or wisdom, is pragmatic. We’re not here to discover great truths about the world outside. We’re here to understand why we’re causing suffering and how we can stop. It’s a practical question, answered with a practical form of discernment or wisdom.

I was recently reading a footnote on the factors for awakening in a sutta anthology. The author was saying that the factor of analysis of qualities is the wisdom factor in the set—“and yet,” he said, “it’s defined as looking into what’s skillful and what’s not skillful in your behavior.” I was surprised at the word “yet” there, that somehow understanding what’s skillful or not was not a matter of wisdom. That’s what the author seemed to be implying. But that’s not the case at all. Discernment is precisely a quality of understanding what’s skillful and what’s not, because our minds are primarily active. We need discernment to direct that activity. When our activity is based on ignorance, we create suffering. If we can learn how to base our activity on knowledge, on wisdom, on discernment, we don’t suffer.

That’s what the practice is all about.