

Seeing Through Your Defilements

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Take a couple of good long deep in-and-out breaths, and notice where you feel the process of breathing in the body. Where is it most prominent? Focus your attention there. It may not be on the air coming in and out of the nose. It may be the movement in the chest or the movement of the stomach. But wherever it's clearest to see, focus your attention there. And then ask yourself, "Is it comfortable?" If you're not sure, you can try different ways of breathing: longer, shorter, deeper, more shallow, heavier or lighter, faster or slower. Experiment to see what different kinds of breathing feel like. When you find one that feels really good, stick with it as long as it feels good. Now, the needs of the body may change, in which case you have to change the way you breathe. That helps keep you up on the present moment so that things don't get put on automatic pilot.

When there's a sense of comfort, allow it to spread through the body. Eventually, you're going to want to develop an awareness that fills the entire body along with a sense of the breath energy filling the entire body. But work up to it section by section. Wherever the breath is discernable, focus your attention there. And if you're going to talk to yourself, talk to yourself about the breath, and about the mind fitting together with the breath. This is a part of concentration called directed thought and evaluation. You direct your thoughts to the breath and then you evaluate it. Is it good, is it not good? Is the mind staying with it or is it not? What would be better? What would work better? Then try to keep your conversation on topic.

Don't be surprised if the mind will have other topics to talk about. It's a common occurrence. In fact, as things begin to settle down in the mind, a lot of your defilements that were in the background suddenly come up to the foreground. And sometimes you're startled to see what's going on in your mind, what kind of things the mind has to say. But just regard that as normal. As Ajaan Lee once said, "To study is to know the texts, but to practice is to see through your defilements." And to see through your defilements, you first have to acknowledge that they're there, to recognize them as defilements, and not get upset by the fact that they are there.

This is one of the reasons why, when the Buddha was teaching meditation to his son, he started out by saying, "Make your mind like earth. Disgusting things get thrown on the earth, but the earth doesn't respond, doesn't react," because if you want to learn how to deal with these things, first you have to admit that

they're there, and be objective about it. To be objective means that you don't identify yourself with them. You don't build an identity around them and you don't let your sense of identity feel threatened by them.

The Buddha's teachings are not about what you *are*. They're all about what you're *doing*, and even though there may be some pretty unskillful things lurking around in the mind, some things that you tend to identify with really strongly, remember that identification is an action. You don't have to be held responsible for all the things you did in the past. You certainly don't have to continue old ways of acting if you see that they're unskillful. So look at the defilement not as a sign of what you are, but simply as traces of what you've done. And you're totally free to change your actions. When they come up, acknowledge that they're there. In some cases, simply acknowledging that they're there is enough to make them go away.

As the Buddha said, there are two types of unskillful thoughts. There's the type that you overcome simply by noticing that they're actually there. They're able to stay in the mind because they're lurking in the shadows, but when you throw a spotlight on them, they wither up. That's one kind. There's the other kind, though, that doesn't wither up easily at all. You could look at it, and it stays. That, as the Buddha said, is when you have to exert a fabrication. In other words, you have to work with those unskillful thoughts, using the processes of fabrication. The word "fabrication" here, *sankhara*, refers to three things. The first, bodily fabrication, is the breath. The way you breathe around certain defilements keeps them going. When anger comes, you breathe in a certain way. When fear comes, you breathe in a certain way, and the way you breathe stimulates certain hormones that actually make the defilement more entrenched.

So learn how to breathe in a new way. It's one of the reasons why we have you focus on the breath as your meditation topic, so that you can get good at breathing in a calm way, breathing in a way that dissolves away patterns of tension, unskillful energies in the body. That way, at the very least, the breath is on your side. You don't let these emotions hijack the breath. You can take it back.

The second kind of fabrication, verbal fabrication, is how you talk to yourself. This is where you find that the defilements have most of their tricks. They will tell you that because a certain emotion has come into you, it's what you really feel. This is the real you. You have to live with it, can't change it—all of which you have to learn how to say No to. After all, old habits can be changed, and we need to see these things as habits. A particular emotion, a particular reaction seems natural because it's habitual. This is one of the lessons you learn when you go into another culture: that the "natural" reactions you've grown accustomed to in yourself and

the people around you really do depend on the culture. They really do depend on context. You change the context, you change the culture, they don't make any sense anymore.

So when you're meditating, it's like going into a new culture. Your thoughts are no longer divided into the categories of what you'd like or what seems powerful, most pressing in the mind. It's more a question of, "If I continued to think this thought, where would it lead?" realizing that you have the choice not to continue with it. Then you look at the thought not in terms of its content, but in terms of what it's going to do to the mind. That's a different culture. It's the culture of the noble ones that looks at things that way.

As the Buddha said, one of the principles of this culture is that we want to learn how to delight in abandoning unskillful actions in the mind and to delight in developing skillful actions. That's not what our normal cultures around us tend to encourage, that kind of delight. They want us to delight in sights, sounds, smells, tastes, tactile sensations, especially the ones they can sell to us. But they don't have our true well-being in mind, whereas the Buddha does. And you should have your true well-being in mind, too. That's a different culture than the culture around us.

So you're creating a new culture, a new set of values inside. This is going to change the way you talk to yourself. This is something you have to learn how to master as a new habit. And as is often the case with new habits, it's going to take a while before it starts feeling natural. But you want to get used to seeing these things simply as actions, habitual actions you indulged in in the past.

But you have the choice now: Do you want to keep indulging in them now? If you think about where they lead, think about their drawbacks, it helps make them look a lot less attractive. But at the same time, you have to see their allure. Why do you like them? What is it about them that's attractive?

This is where you have to dig down into the mind a bit deeper than you might want to see, because the defilements that show themselves on the surface are nothing compared to the ones that keep lurking behind the surface. This is one of the reasons why we try to stabilize the mind with the concentration: so that you can have a sense of well-being you can draw on, a sense of inner worth that this is something you can do, so that you feel less and less threatened by the things that will come up in the mind. That's verbal fabrication.

Then there's mental fabrication. What images are you holding in mind when anger comes? What images are you holding in the mind when the desire for revenge comes, when fear comes, when greed, lust? What is it about the lust, for example, that you find attractive? What about the anger do you find attractive?

There are some emotions that you think you don't find attractive at all, and yet the mind repeatedly indulges in them. There's got to be something that the mind likes about them. You've got to dig around and find that. And when you find the real allure, you begin to realize how paltry and poor it is. Again, it's one of those things that has power because it hides in the background.

So you work on the breath to give the mind a good place to stay. But at the same time, you have to accept the fact that as the mind begins to settle down with the breath and there's less surface motion going on, these other things are going to come showing up. You might regard them simply as disturbances to the concentration. And sometimes you just have to put them aside and say, "I can't deal with these yet." But there are other times where you say, "These are why we're here." We're here not to get the breath. We're here to get the mind, to understand the mind, and to see through these defilements—in other words, to see the tricks they play in the way they talk to us.

One of the big issues in the mind is how the mind talks to itself, and then other voices slip in. You think you're talking to yourself, when actually it's a voice left over from the past you've picked up from somebody else who may or may not have known what they were talking about, or from something you thought in the past when you didn't know anything. There's a lot of that in the mind. So try to see through the mind's conversations. That's how we see through its defilements. This is going to require work. We rest the mind in concentration not simply so that we can rest or run away from things. We rest so that we can be prepared to do our work.

I was teaching in Malaysia recently. There was one Dhamma group that didn't have a teacher, but they had a lot of visiting teachers. And although they were subjected to a lot of different teachings, one point that was common all the way through in the mindfulness teachings and the concentration teachings they had received, was that meditation involves not doing anything, that you simply allow yourself to be totally passive and accept whatever comes up. That's how mindfulness was defined. Even the practice of jhāna: They were told you can't do jhana. Jhana is something that's going to happen on its own.

Well, the Buddha never taught that. Doing jhana is something that he told the monks to do all the time. When you look at his instructions for how to deal with unskillful thoughts, there's a lot of doing. You have to, as he said, exert fabrications, put forth an effort, try to figure things out if you're going to see through your defilements. As I said, there are cases where simply looking at them makes them embarrassed and they go away. But there're others that have stronger eyes. They don't get embarrassed so easily. You stare at them, they stare right back.

Those are the ones you've got to take apart, and you've got to figure them out, precisely what the allure is and what their drawbacks are, so that you can see why it was that you indulged in these habits in the past, but why you don't want to anymore, and why you're able to say No to them more and more effectively.

So seeing through your defilements first involves seeing them, recognizing them, acknowledging that they're there, and not getting blown away by them. We're learning to see them simply as acts of the mind, not as parts of your identity. As the Buddha said, if you want to see something, you have to see it as something separate. And it's a lot easier to see these things as separate if you view them as activities rather than as innate parts of your mind, innate parts of your character. They're simply old habits.

Suffering is an addiction. And the path to the end of suffering is a path to the end of that addiction. Even though it may be difficult to let go of some things that, even though you know they're bad for you, you continue doing them, it's when you really understand them and can look at them squarely and not get blown away by them: That's when you can get past them. As the Buddha said, if you couldn't get past your unskillful habits, there wouldn't have been any point in his teaching.

So we can make changes. This is what meditation is all about. You're doing something new. You're developing new habits. Meditation is a doing. It's doing things in a new way so that you don't keep on doing them in your old ways. Eventually, of course, it leads to something that isn't done, that isn't fabricated. But the path is fabricated. It's something you put together. So do your best to put it together well, and don't get upset when it takes time. Don't get upset when you see that you've been putting together all kinds of bad paths in the past. The past is past and you don't have to make it the present. It'll offer itself up as a possibility, but as we meditate, we're learning new skills in the present moment so that we can shape the present moment in the direction we want.