

Questioning & Conviction

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They've conducted experiments where they put people under hypnosis and tell them that when they get out of hypnosis, they'll do something at a certain signal. And sure enough they come out of hypnosis and, at the signal, they do it—they climb a ladder, wave a hand, or whatever. When they're asked, "Why did you do that?" they'll give explanations. "I wanted to do X, I wanted to do Y." The people running the experiments have claimed that this is proof that people have no free will, that our idea of free will is an illusion because the decision was made much earlier and under much different circumstances from what the people claimed.

Well, it doesn't necessarily prove that. It also just might be the case that most of us—and especially people who are easy to hypnotize—are very ignorant of our own intentions. When you allowed yourself to be put under hypnosis, that was an intention; part of your mind under hypnosis agreed to follow the orders. If you were harder to hypnotize, it might not have agreed. It might have maintained its conscious power of choice.

From the standpoint of the Buddha's teachings, that's the interpretation worth pursuing: that we do have free will and yet we're very ignorant of our intentions. A large part of the purpose of the practice is to learn how to understand what it means to have an intention, to make a choice. It's in those little moments where we exercise freedom of choice that the path to the freedom from suffering lies.

The best way to learn about intentions is to try to set up a constant intention and see what happens to it. Like right now: Make up your mind to stay with the breath and see how long you can do it. You may find that you can stick with it pretty well, or that you're suddenly off someplace else and you don't know why. Well, you go back to the breath again. You do this over and over, and after a while you begin to realize that you've got to expect that there will be a disturbance, there will be a distraction. You've got to prepare for that. The mind will change its mind. A new intention will come in and take over. You've got to learn how to observe that process, to begin detecting the little signals that the mind has changed its mind and yet still pretends to be staying with the breath. Nevertheless, it's ready to go. The briefest lapse of mindfulness, and then it's gone. And you wonder: How could that happen in such a brief moment?

Well, it wasn't just that one brief moment. The decision had already been made, but it was buried. So now you're warned. You want to start detecting that decision, uncovering all the layers of ignorance and delusion that covered it up. As you do this, you'll run into other intentions that like to *keep* it covered up. So there'll be a battle inside. One mind, but there are a lots of minds to it, lots of opinions, lots of intentions. The only way you're going to uncover these things is to try to stick with one intention as long as possible. This begins with the intention to put an end to suffering. And that's based on the conviction that it's possible to do it.

Conviction starts with conviction in the Buddha's awakening, that he did find the end of suffering and he did it through developing powers of his mind. And they weren't powers peculiar to him; they were powers anybody could develop. This is an important form of conviction because it gives you the impetus to get on the path. You say, "He could do it; so can I." You need to maintain that belief.

So the knowledge of the Dhamma that you start out with is not really knowledge. It's a conviction, a belief—an untested hypothesis that you're going to test. But you decide it's worth testing. It's like being a scientist. There are lots of different hypotheses or theories a scientist could test, but the scientist has to focus on testing the ones that seem most promising. Which ones are going to be worthwhile, which ones will teach you something useful if you prove them true or false? If you decide that the idea that suffering can be put to an end is worth testing, it gives you the impetus to start testing the Buddha's teachings in practice.

It also gives you a rudimentary experience of what's called *yoniso manasikara*, or appropriate attention, focusing on the issue of suffering as having paramount importance. We could focus on lots of other issues in life: the economy, the weather, the environment, this person's ideas, that person's preferences—lots of different things we could choose to focus on as being important. But appropriate attention starts with the conviction that suffering is the important problem, and there must be a solution to it. This form of attention is not really knowledge yet, it's a conviction, but it's focusing you on a particular problem. You've chosen this one as the one most worth exploring, most worth trying to solve.

That's why we meditate, because part of the solution to suffering lies in developing certain qualities of mind, such as mindfulness, alertness, concentration. To develop these qualities, you need conviction. When mindfulness lapses, you don't have to debate with yourself as to whether it's worth wandering off after that distraction. Your conviction tells you No, it's best to get back, back to the breath. And that decision is based on the conviction that you should develop right effort. You start generating the desire to want to do this.

People often think that the Buddha gave desire bad press, but he actually gave it a central role in the path. It's right there in right effort: Generate desire to give rise to skillful qualities, generate desire to abandon unskillful ones. In other words, the best way to do this is to get yourself to *want* to do it, so that it's not just a mechanical process of following somebody's orders. You have to find ways of encouraging yourself and inspiring yourself on the path.

That's how you develop your wisdom, how you develop your discernment, motivating yourself to realize that this really is a worthwhile project to pursue. Even though lots of people might say, "What could you possibly learn by just focusing on the breath?" you realize that staying focused here exercises your mindfulness, your concentration, your discernment, all the qualities you're going to need to solve this problem of suffering. These are the qualities that allow you to test the Buddha's claim that by solving the problem of suffering, you solve the biggest problem in life. You actually arrive at the deathless, a happiness that doesn't change, that lies outside of space and time. It's quite a claim, but you can think about what life would be like if there were no happiness lying outside of space and time. Whatever you gained, you'd have to lose it; you'd gain it again,

you'd lose it again. What real satisfaction is there in that? But here's the Buddha, someone who seems reasonable, claiming that it is possible to find a happiness that doesn't have to depend on conditions. And it's up to you to decide: Do you want to make the effort to explore that possibility?

So you sit down and focus on your breath to develop the qualities of mind needed to test that claim. That's the beginning of appropriate attention. It's based on a choice you make—and a choice you have to keep on making, because it's so easy to fall off the path. It can be a long path. It requires a lot of discipline. It requires persistence, patience—qualities that we in the modern world tend to have in only minimal amounts. So it's very easy to give up. You need to keep on generating that desire, keep on reminding yourself why you're here. You're here to learn about the potentials in the mind: How far toward true happiness can these potentials go?

Our belief that this is an important hypothesis to test calls for an interesting combination of skepticism and conviction. But it's only through that kind of questioning, choosing a question you think is important and examining it again and again, that knowledge is attained.

And particularly as you develop these qualities, you begin to understand more and more what it is to make a choice. Where exactly do you make those choices? You begin to realize that there are many, many layers of choice going on in the mind. A lot of our explanations as to why we did something are pretty wide of the mark. They're simplified narratives we create after the fact without really observing these things as they actually happen.

This is why the Buddha places so much emphasis on alertness, the quality of noticing what's going on *as* it's going on. He talks about observing craving, the cause of suffering. You have to see it right there where it's happening to perceive exactly what the choice is, where it was made, and why it was made. You can do that only if you stay very close to the present moment. This is why the breath is such an ideal topic for meditation. It's always right here in the present moment. It's right here where the mind and the body meet. When you're here, you're much more likely to see your intentions as they're being made, the choices as they're being made. But this requires a lot of sensitivity, which is why it requires time. You have to keep coming back, coming back, coming back, looking deeper and deeper, developing stronger and stronger powers of concentration, mindfulness, alertness, getting the mind really still, so that it can detect even the slightest movements within it.

The going may seem slow, but don't let that be a deterrent. The process is gradual for everyone. Even though it seems to be taking a long time and a lot of effort, remind yourself that the Buddha himself had to pursue it for a long time, had to put in a lot of effort. But when he arrived at the goal, he said that it was more than worth the effort. And so you think about that possibility: that through understanding your intentions, you can find something that lies beyond intention; that through exploring your freedom of choice from moment to moment, you can find a freedom beyond moments, beyond time altogether.

So keep looking at the choices you make: Exactly when do you make them, how do you make them, where do you make them? Try to see as precisely as possible. It's right around the area of intention that there lies the opening to freedom. After all, what is a choice? There is a little moment of freedom right there where you can choose X or Y, but we usually don't take full advantage of it.

Our choices tend to be very, very conditioned by past ideas, past beliefs, past habits. Because we're not paying full attention, we just go along with our old ways of doing things. So we don't really appreciate the freedom that lies exactly where that choice is and the way it's made.

An important part of mindfulness is to decondition yourself. The Buddha said, just look at the breath, look at the body in and of itself, putting aside greed and distress with reference to the world—in other words, putting aside your old habits of thinking about the world out there. Put aside your old ways of using your eyes and ears and nose, tongue, body, and mind to focus on issues outside there in the world, to get your knowledge about the world, to figure out how to gain what you want out of the world—and of course getting complacent and careless when you get what you want, and upset when you don't, and trying to find new ways of getting it. Now we want to use our eyes, ears, nose, tongue, body, and mind for other purposes, just to see the processes of the senses as they happen, in and of themselves. Look at them in a way that highlights the movements of the mind, how the mind makes a choice, and how it enforces that choice, how it justifies that choice to itself.

All these processes are going on all the time, but we usually don't look at them because our attention is focused somewhere else far away. So stay right here at the breath, because this is a great place to observe all these other things. The Buddha makes a comparison to six kinds of animals. If you tie them all to leashes and tie the leashes together, the animals will all pull in their various directions to feed. The crocodile will want to go down to feed in the river, the monkey will want to go climb up to feed in the tree, the hyena will want to go to feed in a charnel ground, and so on. Depending on which animal is the strongest, the others get dragged along.

But if you tie them all to an immovable post, then no matter how hard they pull, they all end up staying right there at the post. The post here is mindfulness immersed in the body. The prime way of immersing mindfulness in the body is to be mindful of the breath. When you stay with the breath, you can detect the pull that goes out the eyes, ears, nose, tongue, body, or mind to past and future, to your likes and dislikes. But you don't have to give in to that pull because you've got a place where you can stay grounded and secure. That way you can observe the processes that happen at the eye, the ear, and all the other senses: how a perception arises, how the perception turns into a thought, and how the thought begins to develop fangs to bite you and make you suffer.

These things are all here to be observed. They're all happening all the time. But to see them we have to change our focus. To change our focus requires a change of heart, telling ourselves that this really is important, much more important than things outside. That's what conviction is all about. Appropriate attention is the change of focus; conviction, the change of heart. You make up your mind—and your heart—that this is an important issue that's got to be resolved, and this is the way to do it: training the mind, developing these qualities so you can see what's going on in the present more and more clearly, and you can uncover all those layers of delusion that cover up your intentions, those little spots where there's a potential for freedom that we don't detect.

So that's what we're looking for. Try to keep that as your utmost priority, because only through maintaining that sense of priorities can you actually test what the Buddha taught, and see if the way out really exists.