

Willing & Observing

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When we meditate, when we practice in general, we're dealing with two kinds of truths. One is simply the truth of how things work, which is true regardless of whether you watch them or not, whether you pay attention or not, whether you understand them or not. This is the way things work. When the Buddha said he discovered the Dhamma, this is the kind of Dhamma he discovered: the Dhamma of how things work. But he didn't discover the Dhamma just by observing things. He also dealt with what are called truths of the will: things that happen only if you will them to happen. He had to will himself to develop skillful qualities in order for those qualities to appear in his mind. It's the same when you sit down to meditate: You have to make up your mind that you're going to stay here with the breath. You're going to work on your powers of concentration. And you have to *make* it happen. If you don't make it happen, it's not going to happen on its own,

These two kinds of truths have to work together. Your will has to take into consideration how things actually work. And it's through willing something like this you that you really learn about your mind.

It's like when you cook. If you want to learn about eggs, you have to decide you're going to make something out of the eggs. You can't just sit there and watch the egg from morning till night, day after day, after day, just looking at the egg and seeing what it does on its own. To learn about the egg, you crack it open. You put it in a pan. You apply different levels of heat. You put water in the pan, you put oil in the pan, and you see how the egg reacts to what you do to it. That's how you learn about cause and effect.

So as we meditate, we're doing two things. We're learning how to observe and then how to will in an intelligent way that takes into consideration what we observed in the past, realizing that if we're going to learn more things, we also have to will more things. We can't just sit here and watch the mind as it wanders from this to that to the other thing, and say, "Okay, I'm learning, I'm gaining insight into impermanence and in practicing mindfulness." That's not what mindfulness is all about. Mindfulness means keeping certain things in mind. And some of the things you want to keep in mind are, one, what you've learned about the mind in the past and, two, what you've willed to do right here, right now.

For instance, you're hoping to stay with the breath. You've got to keep watch over the mind to see when it wanders off, and then bring it back. And in the mean time, you've got to learn what the mind likes to stay with. Ask yourself: "How can I keep the mind fully engaged in the present moment?" And here you'll find that there are two aspects to the concentration you have to work on. One is having a focal point, the other is learning how to have a sense of the

body as a whole, and then learning how to balance both together.

Those are the two sides to the concentration practice. You want to stay with one spot in the body as your central focus. But you find as the concentration develops that, say, the sensation of breathing at that central focus is going to get more, and more subtle, harder and harder to keep track of. This is where your ability to keep your whole body in mind, and to be aware of the whole body, is going to give you continuing foundation. Otherwise you get lost. Everything seems to disappear. The sensation of breathing at the nose becomes weaker, less perceptible. The rise and fall of the abdomen gets weaker and less perceptible, and suddenly find yourself hanging in space. If you haven't already worked on developing a sense of the body as a whole, it's very easy to lose your focus, lose your foundation. So you want to develop both sides of the concentration: the focal point and the full-body awareness.

As you work with the concentration, you'll find that there are some times when having the one point of focus has to be emphasized, other times when the body as a whole has to be emphasized, and other times when you have to find a way of keeping both in balance. You learn this both by willing and by observing: willing to find a good way to keep the mind centered in the present moment, and observing to see what works and what doesn't work—learning how to read the situation. It's only by poking at things that you see how they react.

So many times people ask about their meditation, "How should I do this, what do I do then?" A lot of it has to do with experimenting. Seeing what works. But in the back of your mind, you've got the fact that you will. You *want* the mind to settle down, you *want* it to find a good foundation. This connects with the whole process of taking vows. It's good, when you sit down to meditate, to make a vow, "I'm going to stay right here," and then bring to that vow the qualities the Buddha said were important for any kind of determination.

The first is discernment, making sure that you're making a wise vow. Once you've made that vow and you've determined that it's a wise goal to set for yourself, you use your discernment to figure out how you try to go about it, what works and what doesn't work. This is where the experimentation comes in: learning from your efforts in the past and trying to apply that knowledge to what's happening right now. Sometimes you find that the lessons from the past don't quite fit. The lessons you learned don't seem to be working right now. That's when you've got to experiment, to use your ingenuity, to learn something new.

When you've found something that works, then the next quality you want to bring is truthfulness. You really stick with it. You don't sit here, after deciding you're going to meditate, spending the hour figuring out a recipe for tomorrow's meal. You hold to your vow, because if you can't trust yourself to hold to your own vows, how can you trust anybody? And who's going to love you more than you do? Who's going to be more true to you than you are to yourself? If you can't be true to yourself, if you're a traitor to your own best intentions, where are you going to find any safety in life?

So when the Buddha's talking about truthfulness here, it's not simply a matter of saying

true things. It's also a matter of, once you've made up your mind to do something true, you really stick with it. You really are true to it. It's a quality of the heart, a quality of the character, that the Buddha's talking about here. This is a point that Ajaan Lee makes over and over again: If you're not true to the Buddha's teachings, the Buddha's teachings are not going to be true for you. You hear them talking about concentration but as far as you're concerned it's just words. When you hear them talking about discernment, release, it's just words, unless you really do the concentration, you really stick with your determination to give the Buddha's teachings a fair test.

The third quality is relinquishment. Anything that gets in your way of your determination, anything that gets in the way of your values, you've got to learn how to let go—no matter how much you like it, no matter how much you enjoy it. As the Buddha said, a good test of your wisdom is when you know something is unskillful, is going to lead to bad results, but you like to do it. Are you going to be able to tell yourself No, and stick with that No? If you know something is skillful, is going to lead to good results but you don't like to do it, how can you basically make yourself say Yes, and stick with that Yes?—the Yes that says you're going to do it, you're going to see it through.

So a lot of this has to do with relinquishing your likes and dislikes for the sake of what you really know is skillful or unskillful.

I was reading today someone saying mindfulness is all about just saying Yes to everything that happens. Well, No that's not the case. The Buddha's analogy for mindfulness is a gatekeeper at a fortress who's got to be very careful about who he lets in and who he doesn't let in. If you're a wise gatekeeper and you recognize spies or dubious characters, you don't let them in. You say No to them. As for people you know and trust, those are the ones you let in. Those are the ones to whom you say Yes.

So mindfulness is an important part of your faculty of judgment, reminding you of the Buddha's standards for deciding what to abandon and what not to; what to develop and what to let go of. The hard areas are the ones where it's not a matter of blatantly skillful versus blatantly unskillful, but of different levels of skill and happiness. You know that when you do this it will give rise to a certain kind of happiness. You do something else and it will give rise to another kind of happiness. Well, which one is actually more reliable? Which is a more solid and lasting form of happiness? A more worthwhile happiness to work for? Those are the areas where the choices are difficult, but you've got to learn how to make them. You can't have your cake and eat it too. If you want to win at chess, you have to sacrifice some of your pieces. You won't win by keeping all of your pawns. So you have to figure out: Which kinds of happiness are you going to sacrifice? You might like to sit here making plans for next week, but it's not nearly as useful as staying right here with the breath in the present moment. The mind may complain that you're not really using your intelligence, but it's a different kind of intelligence you're working on here: an intelligence that knows how to stick with something that takes time

to develop, an intelligence that realizes that you've got to work on your powers of concentration if you want to see anything clearly.

It wasn't until the Buddha got all the way into the fourth jhana—where purity of mindfulness and purity of equanimity allowed him to gauge things for what they really were—that he was able to see things clearly in his mind. If you haven't reached that level of stillness, you're not in a position where you can see things clearly. Are you there yet? No? Then your perception of things can't totally be trusted. You've got to work and learn how to bring things to stillness. The kind of intelligence that gets you there, that's true to your vow, that's able to relinquish anything that gets in the way of your vow: That's the kind of intelligence you've got to work on.

The final quality the Buddha has you bring to all this is peace—in other words, not getting worked up over the fact that you've got to make an effort, not getting worked up over the fact that you've got to let things go. You learn to calm your mind, how to take joy in the fact that you're developing a skill. One of the things I had to learn in Thailand was how to sharpen a knife on a stone. It takes time, you have to be very present, and you can't be in too much of a hurry. If you're in too much of a hurry, you ruin the blade. So you have to find a way to keep yourself entertained with the fact that you're paying close attention to this blade, this blade right here, keeping yourself interested in what you're doing. That way you don't get worked up over the fact you may have a long time before this blade is done, and by not getting worked up, the job eventually gets done as it should.

There's a great passage in *Joseph and his Brothers*, where Joseph is sent off to prison and the person in charge of the boat carrying him off to the prison is upset to see that Joseph is not miserable. And Joseph says, "Well, I'm making a story about this, and learning how to keep myself entertained about the fact that I'm going to prison. Maybe it's not the end of my life. Maybe this going to prison is going to be an important part of my life, just one chapter in a longer story." And in that way he was able to maintain his calm.

Part of keeping yourself calm, as you do this, is learning how to tell yourself the right stories. Sure you're facing difficulties, but, hey, you've faced difficulties in the past. Things may be boring, but that's because you're not paying careful enough attention. After all, here is your mind in the present moment. Everything in your mind is laying itself out there on the table. Is that boring? Well, it may be not what you want to see. You usually like to have nicer things on the table but at least here it is. This is your mind. There are subtleties that you can look for here. There are lots of things you can do to make this inquiry into the mind more and more interesting. And as it's more interesting, you'll find that you're letting yourself get more and more calm, not worked up over the fact that the path to awakening can take a lot of time, a lot of effort, all your powers of observation, all your intelligence. Because the immediate task is fascinating. It can absorb all your interest.

Simply being on this path is much better than just wandering through the jungle, not

knowing where you are, or having no direction at all. You're following the path that's been followed by a lot of really admirable people in the past. Noble people. And at least it has a goal, it has an end, whereas all the jobs of the world have no end at all.

The Thai ajaans like to keep saying when people retire from their jobs, it's not because the jobs are done. It's just that the people are now too tired, too weak, too old to keep up the work. And the world's work never gets done. But the work of the training of the mind does have a point of completion. And just thinking about that is enough to calm a lot of the fevers of the mind.

So these are some of the qualities you want to bring to this process of developing truths of the will. You're developing a mind that's concentrated. You're developing a mind that's getting into a position where it can observe things inside and out more clearly. That way, you can combine those two kinds of truths—the truths of the will, the truths of the observer—to take the mind to where you really want it to go: to a happiness that really is satisfying, that more than repays all the effort that goes into it.