

Quality Control

January 31, 2018

Close your eyes, watch your breath. When the mind asks, “Why am I watching the breath?” you say, “Because the mind needs training.” “When the mind is trained it brings happiness”: a statement of the Buddha.

When it’s not trained, it can bring a lot of suffering. Even when conditions outside are fine, you can still find something to get upset about. But we train the mind because we realize that the suffering that really weighs down the mind is not the suffering that comes from outside. It’s the suffering that comes from inside: our own cravings, our own ignorance. We act in ways that are aiming at happiness and for some reason they can bring pain. This is something we want to look into: Why is that? Where is the ignorance? Well, it’s right here at our intentions.

It’s like a factory with very poor quality control. Whatever comes down the assembly line just gets sent out into the world. So we need to learn some restraint. A thought comes up in the mind: Is it really worth acting on? Is it really worth speaking? Is it really worth continuing to think? Those are quality-control questions.

What you send out into the world, of course, is going to come right back at you. So you want to send out good things. As for the bad things, you can just let them die inside. You’re not committed to them. Just because they arise in your own mind doesn’t mean that you have to lay claim to them or have to act on them.

So we focus on the breath to give the mind a place where it can stay and resist the push of some of these ideas. After all, they don’t just appear, they have a push. They push you to act, push you to say, push you to think. You need to have something to resist that push. So try to develop a sense of well-being around the breath. A lot of the push comes from the desire for happiness, the desire for pleasure. When you already have some pleasure or well-being inside, it helps you resist the push. It also helps you see more clearly where things are going to go. All too often, something comes up and you just ride with it. It seems okay at first glance, so you let first glance be enough. But if you’re really still, really observant, you can begin to see the tell-tale signs, “Oh, this is not going to be good. This is going to lead in an unskillful direction,” and you can learn how to say No in time.

So this is why we train the mind. It’s quality control. After all, these are our words and our thoughts and our deeds, and you want them to have high quality. Don’t just say anything that comes into your mind or do anything just because it comes into your mind. You need to learn the principles of restraint. It’s through restraint that you learn how to act only in ways that will actually lead to happiness. Throw away the ideas that, if you acted on them, would lead to suffering and pain.

So try to be as comfortable with the breath as you can and as steadily with the breath as you can. That improves your powers of resistance and your powers of perception, both of which are needed to make sure that the quality of what comes out of you is good.