

Close to What You Know

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Our minds are filled with all kinds of knowledge, but exactly how certain is that knowledge and how useful is it? Right now as you're meditating, there's not much you need to know. You're sitting here focusing on your breath, so notice how the breath feels. If it doesn't feel comfortable, see what you can do to make it more comfortable. In other words, notice what you're doing and notice the results. That's a very direct kind of knowledge. The sensation of ease or stress or whatever you're feeling with the breath: that's something you experience directly. That's the sort of thing you experienced back when you were a child before you knew language at all. It's a very direct kind of knowledge. As you move away from this level of experience, things get less and less certain.

To function in many areas of life, we have to deal with uncertainties. But for the time being, let's stick with what's really certain: just what you're doing with the breath and the results you're getting. Notice when you're putting too much pressure on the breath, or not enough pressure - "not enough" meaning that the mind just starts floating away. As you do this, you're learning a very important principle: the principle of action. This, for the Buddha, is a basic truth—cause and effect, the actions you do and the results you get. When he described his Awakening in its simplest terms, he put it as a principle of causality, which applied directly to this issue. What are you doing and what results are you getting? In particular, what are you doing that's causing suffering? What can you do to put an end to suffering?

Those are his basic building blocks. As for other issues that come up in the practice, they should all be related back to those building blocks. Like the whole question of self: We're often told that the Buddha taught that there wasn't a self, but then immediately the question is: Who's doing the actions? Who's receiving the results? What goes from one life to the next? But that's putting the cart before the horse, assuming that this teaching on not-self, which is an interpretation, is the primary teaching. We forget that the primary teaching is the fact of action and result, skillful and unskillful. If you take that as your context, then the issue of self becomes a question of: What kind of activity is self? And what are the results of selfing in different situations?

When you look at your sense of self in that way, you begin to realize that it's something you do, something you put together given certain circumstances. You perceive a certain world out there, and again, that's an assumption based on some things you've done. Then you assume a self acting in that world. This selfing is not just metaphysical, it's often psychological. You sense certain motives that other people have, and you react to those assumptions. And what often happens is that you often suffer. If it's the four-year-old you you're selfing, you suffer a lot.

So you've got to remember that we need to be able to take those worlds apart, take that sense of self apart—see them both as actions. You create your sense of that particular world. You're reading the data, you're reading certain things into it, and you're coming out with suffering. So you need to learn how to read the

data in a different way, a way that's not going to lead to suffering.

This is one of the reasons why the breath is so useful, because you can step outside of a lot of your thought worlds by stepping into the world of the breath. You can always tap into the breath because it's always here as long as you're alive. And from this perspective you can look at action and its results in a very direct way, because your intentions are right here next to the breath. There's nothing in the body, nothing in the physical world, that's any closer to your mind than your breath. You keep looking away, out there, out there, making assumptions about the world outside and neglecting some very important data right here.

You've probably heard those reports they've had of discovering planets around other stars beside the sun. Well, nobody so far has actually seen any of the planets. They have certain data that indicate regular fluctuations in the star's brightness that would suggest that there's a planet there. But what do they really know for sure in those experiments? Well, they know what they did to get the data they got, they know the raw data, and they know the assumptions and principles they used in interpreting the data. That's all they really know. But the conclusion that there's a planet depends on the assumptions, which may turn out right, may turn out wrong.

But notice how they do that. The actual knowledge they're gained is the knowledge of how they ran the experiment and what kind of data they got—the raw data, the numbers that come out—and then what they did with those numbers. As for whether their conclusions are true, that's another matter. But what they know for sure is what they did, and the raw data they obtained through their doing.

As you meditate, you want to keep your focus that clear, that close. What are you doing with the breath? What are you doing with the mind? What assumptions are you using about the breath and the mind? And what results do you get?

Sometimes you find yourself creating a sense of self around the breath. As you get more and more used to the breath energy in the body, you develop a set series of ways of identifying yourself as the breather, which will create certain patterns of tension in the body that are really, really tenacious. Some patterns of tension come and go with each breath. Others last a bit longer, but the ones associated with the breather, those tend to last. Which is why it's good to loosen up your conception of what it means to breathe—where the breath is coming in, what needs to be done for it to go out. You can think of the body as a large sponge, with the breath can come in from all directions. You don't have to pull it in through the nose. And breath energy is not something that you have to fight to pull in. It just comes in, goes out. It's all ready to come in if you just let it in. Think of it that way and you find yourself breathing in a different way. That shows you the power of your thought, the power of your assumptions, what they call attention, or *manasikara*, in the texts.

So again, the knowledge here is knowledge of what you're doing and the results you get: that's the basic data, that's where your knowledge is clearest. When you move out away from that and make assumptions, you get more and more into the world of uncertainty. As I said earlier, you need some assumptions to function. Say you're dealing with a table. You learn that if you try to walk through the table, you can't. You bang your shins. So you learn to make some

assumptions about the solidity of the table. But exactly how solid is that table? We think of solid mass as being that totally solid, totally filled, but it's not. You've probably read about all the atoms in the table, and how each atom contains a lot more space than hard matter. And even with the protons and electrons: are they really hard? Are they just electromagnetic vibrations? Vibrations of what? Or are they just little distortions in space-time? You could keep on asking questions like this, but for the purpose of walking around the room all you need to know is that if you try to walk through the space between the atoms, you can't do it. You keep bumping up against that sense of solidity.

So which of these assumptions is true? They're all true. The question is which one is useful, and for what purpose? If you simply try to walk across the room and find a table in the way, remember the solidity of the table, so you don't bang your shins. If you want to develop psychic powers and walk through tables, that's another matter.

But the important thing is that you realize all your knowledge of the world comes from your actions and the results you get from those actions. That's the basic data. And for the Buddha, that's the basic data too. It's just that he keeps reminding you: keep looking back at your actions and don't get too sucked into your assumptions, into the worlds you create out of these things, or the different senses of self that you create around these things. Learn to look for the ones that are useful, the assumptions that are useful, for any given purpose. But also learn how to take them apart to remind yourself they are just that, assumptions—so that when they start causing harm or suffering, you can drop them. Realize that that's not the right time, that's not the right place for those assumptions.

The Buddha's assumptions about what's useful to know, what's not useful to know, parallel very closely his ideas about what's useful to speak about, or what's right to speak about. He says you speak about things that are true. But just because they're true doesn't mean you have to speak about them. You also have to look for whether they're useful. And even that's not enough. You have to look at what's the right time and the right place to speak about these things.

Well, the same thing applies to truths. There are lots of truths about the world out there, just as there are lots of radio waves going through the air right now. Which truths are useful to tune into right now, given your sense of time and place?

This is why the Buddha avoided questions about whether there is or isn't a; whether the world is eternal or not, because he realized that these questions are constructions. There are times when a sense of self is useful. When you want to be responsible, when you want to learn how to delay your desire for immediate gratification for the sake of long term gratification: Those are times when you need a clear sense of self. But there are other times when a sense of self actually gets in the way of a deeper happiness. So you look at your "self" as an activity, something you do, and then you can stop doing it when it's not useful. It's like having different perceptions of the world - the physical world, the psychological world, whatever worlds you are involved with: Tune in to the frequency that's helpful right now, and let the other ones go.

This is why we focus on the breath, because the breath is an area where you can establish an awareness that can begin to see these activities: how does the mind create a sense of self, how does it create a sense of world, what are the

actual data that it's got right here, what are the assumptions that it builds things out of? When you're with the breath, you can see these things a lot more easily, because the breath is one of the building blocks from which these things are created. The way you manipulate the energy in your body is going to determine how you identify yourself, along with sense of the world you inhabit. If the energy in your body's really uncomfortable, whatever world you've got out there is going to feel confining. But if you can breathe through it, you can learn to walk through those uncomfortable worlds, dissolve them away.

This doesn't mean that you can create anything you like out of anything at all. The results of your past actions place some limits on the realities you can create in the present. But when you stick with this level of: "Just what are you doing, and what are the results?" that's when you stay closest to the truth. That's when you see most clearly what the possibilities are. What, at the present moment, is the most skillful way to interpret your experience of reality? What can you shape, what can you not shape? When you keep things on this level, you find you can deal with reality, shape your reality, in a much more skillful and beneficial way.