

# *The Buddha's Investment Strategy*

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As you focus on the breath and stay with the breath, you're developing good qualities of mind: mindfulness, alertness. As you apply these qualities to the process of breathing, you'll see that it's a kind of fabrication. There's a willed and intentional element in there. And because there's an element of will, you can change it. You can find ways of calming it down. This way you give rise to discernment as well, leading to concentration. These two qualities - discernment and concentration, as they're supported by mindfulness and alertness - bring the mind to greater and greater stillness, greater and greater clarity. So as we're working with the breath, we're not just working with the breath. We're also gaining insight into the processes in the mind.

This is a very useful and important investment of our time and energy. Sometimes you hear it said that when you meditate you're not supposed to have any sense of gaining or getting anything out of the meditation. But that teaching is simply an antidote to the impatience we normally bring to the meditation. You do a little bit of meditation and you want to get lots and lots of results right away. So you've got to learn how to put that attitude out of your mind. But, still, there *are* returns, there *are* benefits that come from meditation. And it is an investment—an investment in something reliable: these qualities of mind. They stay with you whether the economy goes up, whether the economy goes down. And whether the body gets healthier, gets sick, or when it dies, the qualities you've invested in will stay with the mind.

And so, given the fact we have a limited amount of time, a limited amount of energy, we want to make sure that we invest our time and energy in the most reliable things. If you invest in your attachments, you'll find that they give you some support for a certain amount of time, and then they start changing on you. As the Buddha said, everything fabricated - which means everything put together by causes - is inconstant. When you find yourself latching on to something inconstant, it can give you support only as long as it lasts, and then it's going to change. Even good qualities of the mind are inconstant, but the more you invest in them, the longer their impact, the longer their ability to support you, all the way through the process of aging, all the way through the process of illness, all the way through the process of death. These things stay there. And they can help you. The body is something you're going to have to let go of, and eventually you're going to have to let go of your memories, your thoughts, everything having to do with this life. At that point, the irrevocable quality of time really pushes itself on you.

In terms of our day-to-day life, we tend to live in our narratives, our stories about this person, and that person, and the relationships we have with them, the things we've done. The reassuring quality of a narrative is that you can tell it again and again and again, and it seems to put this constant flow of time at bay for a while. But as things close down with the body, those narratives don't provide any help. In fact, they can make things even worse. The things you're going to miss, the things you're going to regret having done, will come pressing

in on you. And you have to let go. If you haven't had any practice in letting go, it's going to be hard.

So this is an important skill to invest in: learning how to let go. The Buddha talks about different forms of wealth in the mind that you can invest in - in other words, qualities you can develop that can see you through - and the ability to let go is an important one.

Discernment is another. The Buddha had a very pragmatic approach to truth. As we talk about the truth of our statements, the things that we say, to what extent can you encompass the truth of the experience in words? Poets struggle with this all the time, and are constantly admitting that words are poor when it comes to capturing the actual experience of something. Pictures are a poor rendition of experience. As they say, a picture's worth a thousand words, but it can lie much more than a thousand words, too. What's really real in life are the processes happening right here, right now, the way we create words, the way we use words, the way we use ideas, and then the impact they have in terms of causing stress and suffering, or alleviating stress and suffering: That's a truth, that's a reality, much truer than the words themselves.

So you want to focus on really getting in touch with that reality. This doesn't mean that words are totally false. They convey some truth, and they're useful as tools. The impact they have on the mind is real. You look at the story of the Buddha's Awakening. They say he had three knowledges in the course of that night. The first was looking back on his past lifetimes. You think you have narratives to deal with in your life: He suddenly remembered eons and eons of narratives—where he had been, what he had been, his name, his appearance, the food he ate, the pleasure and pains that he'd experienced in that life, and then how he died. And then he moved on to another life, then another life.

But that knowledge wasn't his Awakening. So he went on to the second knowledge, which was knowledge of beings dying and being reborn all over the cosmos. In other words, moving from his own personal narrative, he went to a more general look at the cosmos as a whole, seeing that he wasn't the only one who was going through this process of repeated birth and death. Many, many beings all the way from beings in hell, beings up to the various levels of heaven, even Brahmas, in states of infinite space, infinite consciousness, nothingness, neither perception nor non-perception: They are all dying and being reborn, and moving around from level to level. Seeing all these movements, he was able to see that there was a general principle to them all, by looking at the cosmos as a whole. The general principle was that people suffered pleasure and pain because of their actions - their intentions - which in turn were determined by their views. If their views were wrong - in other words, if they felt that actions didn't have any impact, that it didn't really matter what you did, what you said, what you thought - they were going to suffer, because they were going to act on that belief and suffer from their lack of skill. If they believed that their actions did have an impact, were important, and it was important that you looked at your intentions, at your actions, and at their results, they'd experience pleasure.

Even seeing that, though, still didn't put an end to his own suffering. But it did give him some clues. Views and intentions are important. And so in terms of the third knowledge that night, he started looking at his views, looking at his intentions, right in the present moment, seeing them as activities in the mind:

These intentions, based on a misunderstanding of what suffering is, where it comes from, how it can be ended, lead to more suffering. The views that do understand where suffering comes from, lead you to make the intention of the path, to put an end to that suffering, based on correct understanding of how you've got to look at the processes here in the present moment, particularly seeing how craving arises and how the mind flows with the craving, from moment to moment. As the Buddha later said, the way craving goes from moment to moment in this lifetime is the same process that's going to flow from the last moment of this life to the first moment of the next.

So you've got your laboratory right here. We're not concerned with what you are; the concern is with what you do. And you can see that. What you are is an abstraction, but what you can do is something you can watch right here, right now. That's something you can always watch if you have the intention and the understanding that helps you realize that this is something important to look at. Most of the time, though, we tend to look at other things. We get wound up in all our other narratives, all our other views, which tend to deflect our intention from the present moment. The mind is like a politician: The politician is doing his dirty work, but he keeps diverting our attention, pointing out that "Those other people are horrible; look at those horrible things other people are doing." But if you keep looking right here, right here, right here, staying with the breath, then because the breath is the closest thing to the mind, you begin to see the movements of the mind. You see how they cause suffering, and how they can put an end to suffering. That understanding is real. That process is something you really see and it really happens. That's something you know for sure.

William James, the philosopher, talks about what's called a pragmatic approach to truth. You realize that the truth of a statement can only be approximate: Words can never give a totally comprehensive account of reality. But watching the mind in the process of creating a statement, watching it in the process of creating any of its views about reality, you see that it really does have an impact. So the statement - even though it may only be an approximate truth - does lead to a certain type of action, and the action leads to certain type of result, which you can experience directly. The experience of that process is a truth of a different order.

So it's important that you learn how to develop the ideas that will lead you to act in ways that put an end to suffering. If you encounter any idea that leads to more suffering, more ignorance, more craving, you don't have to hold onto it. You can let it go.

So as we're sitting here, trying to stay focused on the breath and noticing when the mind wanders off: That ability to drop a thought mid-sentence, drop a thought even when it's all loose ends, is an important skill. You catch yourself in the middle of creating a little reality there but then you can reestablish your frame of reference in the present moment. You get more and more skillful at letting go, able to catch yourself in these various processes more and more quickly, and you gain a deeper understanding of why you go for these things. All of these skills are going to stand you in good stead. They're good skills to invest in.

So you need to make the time—the time isn't going to happen on its own, you know—you have to make the time to practice. Create the time to practice. Open

that space in your life, so you can invest that time in the skills that are really going to be helpful all the way through. Because suffering is real - but the end of suffering is also real. That's why the time spent investing in understanding these things, mastering the skills for putting an end to suffering, is time well spent. You suffer less. The people around you suffer less as well. As you go through the process of aging, illness, and death, if you can manage your mind, the other problems that come up are going to be minor.

So this is the Buddha's investment strategy - invest in good qualities of the mind, develop a mind that you can trust not to go flailing around when things get difficult. That's the wisest investment of all.