

Even Shame Can Be Skillful

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In one of the accounts of the events leading up to his awakening, the Buddha said that the first factor in the noble path that he discovered was right concentration. It's the center of the path. The other factors, he said, are its supports. So as we focus on the path, this is the main factor we have to focus on. We have to make it our center, too, because it puts us in a position of strength, a position of well-being. You focus on the breath. Stay with it all the way in, all the way out, and notice what feels comfortable. As the Buddha says, you try to make yourself sensitive to the whole body and then try to breathe in a way that gives rise to feelings of ease.

So that's what you experiment with as you meditate—sometimes feelings of ease, sometimes feelings of more energy, depending on the body needs. Learn how to read the needs of your body, and see the extent to which you can fulfill those needs by the way you breathe. Sometimes you want good deep breathing, especially when you're tired: good long deep in-breaths, less emphasis on the out-breath, again and again and again. That will help energize the body. In the other direction, if you find yourself tense, you may need to relax, so try a short in-breath and a long relaxed out-breath. Think of the out-breath carrying away all the tension in the body. And then try to maintain that sense of ease.

People sometimes ask, how are you going to gain any insight focusing on the breath? It's right here in the maintaining that you begin to see the mind, see the movements of the mind, because you're giving yourself a good standard against which to measure things. Otherwise, the mind moves around, and because everything is moving, it's like being in the middle of the ocean. You don't know where the currents are leading you. You're out in the middle of the ocean. There's no island, there's no shore anywhere, so who knows if you're moving? Are you going north? Are you go south? You look up and all you see are clouds, and they're moving, too. But if you have a reference point, you know: Now you're going north, now you're going south. If there's a spot on the shore, you can begin to notice how you're moving relative to the shore.

It's the same with the breath. The breath is your shore. The breath is your reference point. If the mind moves away from the breath, you know it's moved. And you can ask yourself: How does that movement feel? Because it's not going to just be mental movement. There's going to be a sense of physical energy going along with it as well. The breath is where the mind and the body meet. The breath, of all

the properties of the body, is probably the most sensitive to the movements of the mind. So you're in good position to see how the mind is moving around. And you can begin to catch it when it goes off.

It's important you have the right attitude toward it when it does go off. On the one hand, you want to bring it back as quickly as possible. But on the other hand, you don't want to make it unpleasant coming back. Don't scold yourself or start berating yourself for being a miserable meditator. This is part of what meditation entails: wandering off and coming back. Learning how to come back as an important part of the skill. You notice that it was a mistake. You see, but what you really want is to be back here with the breath.

So when you come back to the breath, try to make it even more comfortable. Where is there still tension in the body? Where is there still a sense of dis-ease in body or mind? How can you focus on the breath so that you're more likely to stay the next time there's a temptation to move off? It might have to do with the rhythm of the breathing, the depth, where in the body you're focused. You can play around with these things—and having a sense of play in the meditation is really helpful.

This issue of learning how to come back is an important skill, because it influences not only how you sit here meditating, but how you deal with other mistakes in your life. You try to carry the breath out into daily life, and suddenly you wonder where it went. So remember a lesson from your meditation: The breath is right here. If you can't find the breath, then stop breathing for a few seconds. Then the breath will come. That's your anchor. As for whatever it was that pulled you aside, learn how to let go of that thought world at least for the time being. Even if you're in the midst of a conversation with other people, it might even good to be quiet for second and just reestablish your center.

And learn to do it with a minimum of recrimination, because we're learning not only how to control our thoughts here, but also how to shape our emotions.

This is probably the most unexpected part of meditation, but as you're focusing on the breath, you're learning all the raw materials for your emotions. Being with the breath throughout the body gets you in touch with the physical side of your emotions and then with the other elements of what are called fabrication. There's verbal fabrication, which is the mind talking to itself—what it focuses on, how it evaluates what it's focusing on. It's called directed thought and evaluation. You've got that in meditation as well. In this case, you keep directing your thoughts to the breath and you evaluate the breath.

And then there's mental fabrication, which is feelings—feelings of pain or stress on the one hand, and pleasure and ease on the other hand, then the more

neutral feelings, hard to describe as either pleasant or painful. And then also the perceptions, the labels you put on things—good, bad, this, that, breath, not breath, body, whatever.

As you focus on the breath, you begin to realize you've got all these elements right here. You're employing them in the meditation. You're getting hands-on practice in learning how to shape them. So shape the feeling of the breath in the body. Take more direct control over where you direct your thoughts and how you evaluate things. What perceptions are relevant to what you're doing right now? Which ones are not relevant—i.e., unskillful, unhelpful? And how do you generate a feeling of ease regardless of how you felt when you sat down?

When you're in touch with these things, you're in touch, as I said, with the basic building blocks of your emotions. There's the nonverbal side of the emotion, but there's also the verbal side. You may have the idea that the nonverbal side comes first. We tend to identify very strongly with that. If nothing else, that's who we are: our feelings. But if you really look at your feelings, you find that they do have a verbal component. Sometimes it's a word or two that sets you off, or a perception about another person, about the situation you find yourself in. How you read the situation is going to determine the emotion.

When you learn how to take some control over these elements in meditation, it also gives you an opportunity to take control over them in daily life. When you're dealing with difficult situations, how are you breathing right now? How do you read the situation? Is it a helpful way? Are there other ways of reading the situation that are more likely, say, to resolve a problem? Or to keep you from getting depressed?

Years back when I was an exchange student in the Philippines, I remember one day. There was a strange expression that my foster mother used. She said to me, "I said to my mind...." It struck me as an unusual way of speaking about it, talking to your mind, but you do. You tell your mind all kinds of things. So why not try telling it good things, useful things, instead of getting in the same old feedback loops that make things heavier and heavier? If you find yourself caught up in the emotion, you can stop and ask yourself, one, "How am I breathing?" Two, "How am I directing my thoughts? What am I evaluating? What are the perceptions, the labels I am applying to this? What are some alternatives?" When you can reestablish a sense of well-being with the breath, it's a lot easier to distance yourself from unskillful emotions.

And you find you really can replace them with other emotions that are just as genuine, because emotion is something fabricated. It's conditioned. It's not who you really are. If you find that you've conditioned yourself in an unskillful way,

well, you can recondition yourself. And you don't have to worry about who conditioned you to begin with. Just notice that there is this condition and you can change it. If you find you make mistakes, don't use them as an excuse to go into a tailspin.

It's interesting to note that the Buddha did talk about shame as a useful emotion. We here in the West have a lot of problems around shame. A lot of psychotherapy is devoted to rooting it out. But if you've ever dealt with a shameless person, you know that shame does have its uses. It's not just for other people. But you have to use it in a skillful way. You're using it coming from a sense of well-being. And its primary use is to learn how to analyze an action you realize was not the most noble or wisest thing to do: It's the action that was shameful, not you as a person. Always try to make that distinction. In other words, that's how you label the issue. That's how you direct your thoughts, and how you evaluate the issue. Analyze the action, see it either in terms of the intention that you were able to catch, or the result that was something you don't want to repeat.

As the Buddha said, having a sense of shame combined with compunction—the feeling that you don't want to do something because you know it's going to have bad results: Those things, he says, are the protectors of the world to keep society going. This is why we can live with one another. It's just a matter of learning how to handle these emotions in a skillful way. And they do become a helpful part of the path. As the Buddha said, when you see you've made a mistake, letting yourself get eaten up by remorse is not going to erase the past mistake. But a healthy sense of shame—“That was a mistake, I don't want to repeat that”—becomes the basis for your resolve not to do that action again.

Then, the Buddha says, you try to develop goodwill for yourself, goodwill for all beings. When you're coming from this sense of well-being, you can deal with all kinds of emotions that you may have handled poorly in the past. But you learn that, coming from this position of strength and well-being, you can handle them, and they are useful. We don't want a society of shameless people. Look what's happened in this world—all the horrible things that people do because they lack a sense of shame.

So there's healthy shame and unhealthy shame. Make sure you make the distinction. And use the tools of meditation to keep yourself on the healthy side, whatever the emotion that comes up. That way, when you make a mistake, you learn from the mistake with a minimum of flailing around. When you do something well, you can pat yourself on the back and yet not get complacent. Just keep on training, as the Buddha said, because you've got all the tools you need. It's

only natural that we learn through trial and error, for that's what leads to trial and success.

So keep working with these basic skills, because they give you the tools and the skills you need to handle any situation that comes, not just for sitting here with your eyes closed, but also for dealing with your mind, dealing with the situation around you—tools you can apply all the time.