

Assumptions

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The mind is a lot like the weather. There are some days when it's calm, pleasant, a good person to be around. Other days when it's stormy, erratic. And it's important that you learn how to deal with the stormy and erratic days. If you wait until everything is nice and calm before you meditate, you don't get really much practice in understanding the mind, shaping the mind, getting it out of an unskillful state.

This is what right effort is all about. As the Buddha says, it starts with desire: the desire to do what's skillful. You hold onto that even if it's not getting immediate results. That's a skillful desire. It's part of the path.

And of course you want to do it skillfully as well. If an unskillful state comes up and you try to deny it or push it away, it's going to come right back. Or if it doesn't come right back, you replace it with another unskillful state, another problem. That doesn't help at all.

This is why it's necessary to learn how to sit with an unskillful state for a while—partly to develop patience, but primarily to understand it, to watch it as it comes and goes.

This requires, of course, that at least part of your mind isn't taken over by that unskillful state. There is a quiet corner someplace in there. You can establish it just by the way you breathe. Look for a good quiet way to breathe, a relaxing or refreshing way to breathe. And even though lots of things are storming around in the mind, you can still breathe calmly. The storms in the mind don't wipe out the breath—if they did, you would die. The breath is there, and you can make it comfortable.

And then starting from that foundation, you can look into that mind-state. Watch it. Is it as steady as you think it is? It comes in its ways. It has its gusts just like the wind today. And then it'll die down. It comes again, then dies down. And you can pose the question, "When it comes, what comes along with it? And when it dies down, what just disappeared?"

As the Buddha said, everything you need to know in the practice is immediately available to your awareness right here, right now. You don't have to go assuming anything underground or lying behind the scenes. Just watch for what's happening and see how certain things happen together.

What you usually find is that the unskillful mind-state is accompanied by some assumptions. This is where the teaching on perception comes in. The Pali word for perception, *sañña*, has lots of different meanings. One is simply the label you apply to things. Another is the assumptions you make about them.

And you might want to look into those assumptions as they come into the

mind. Because what they usually do is to tell you, “You’ve got to do something about this thought.” Something comes up in the thought, something makes you angry, “You’ve got to do something about it!”

Or if you start desiring something, something in the mind will say, “Yeah, that’s something really worth desiring.” Those are the assumptions you’ve got to look for. And see what other assumptions lie behind them.

For instance, if there’s something you want, there’s something you crave: “You’ve got to get it. If you don’t get it, you’re not really alive.” That’s one assumption, and it’s usually not true.

But this is something that each of us has to find for him or herself. What are the assumptions that cause us to go along with the greed, go along with the anger, the lust, the envy, the pride, whatever the problem is? You have to look at those assumptions and realize that they’re wrong view. They’re creating a lot of unnecessary stress and suffering.

This is what the Buddha focused on again and again: the unnecessary stress we cause ourselves. All too often we think we *have* to do the things that cause stress, for one reason or another—whatever the reasons are we’ve picked up from our families, our schools, TV, radio, newspapers, magazines, the Internet. There are all kinds of crazy assumptions out there about what’s a meaningful way to live a human life and what’s a good way to live a human life and what you’ve got to do in order to be happy. We pick them up as part of the air we breathe.

One of the important parts of meditation is breathing them out, learning how to sit down and watch: What are your assumptions that make you do things that are stressful, harmful, and cause suffering? And do you really believe in them? Are they worth believing in? Learn how to question them.

One way of questioning them is to put up some alternative perceptions, alternative assumptions. For instance, we tend to think of sensual desire as something glamorous. And so the Buddha has us remember, what exactly is it we desire?

Look at the object of the desire, especially if it’s the body, and you realize that the desire’s focusing on only a few aspects. There’s a lot that it doesn’t want to look into. So you make it look into those things. What’s right under the skin? What goes into the body? What comes out of the body? These perceptions help to weaken your focus on the object. And then you can start focusing on the desire itself.

Here again, we tend to think of the desire as something glamorous, something alive, but the Buddha provides lots of different perceptions to help you think about it in different ways. The raptor with the little piece of meat in its mouth: As soon as he gets it, all these other crows and hawks and falcons and whatever are going to come and try to steal it away. If he doesn’t let it go,

he's going to get killed.

Sensual desire is borrowed goods. Sensual desire is all kinds of dangerous and unattractive and unappealing things. Because when you look at what it actually does to you, the position it puts you in, and all the trouble you go to get just that little bead of honey on the edge of a knife blade: Is that really the position you want to be in?

It's in this way we work with our perceptions as a means of inducing right view and helping to give rise to the skillful desire that's such an important part of right effort.

So you're changing the way the mind labels things, the associations it has with things. And you give yourself something to keep in mind. These are the various uses of perception in the practice.

It's a practice called *anupassana*: looking for something, keeping tabs on something. In other words, making up your mind that there are certain ways of looking at the world that are really going to be helpful, that have a good effect on the mind: looking at things in terms of their being inconstant, stressful, not-self, or unattractive; and then just looking for those features wherever you can find them.

This way, as you watch the unskillful states arising and passing away, you can question the assumptions that underlie them. Some of these assumptions have never been questioned in your life, so it's going to be a little unsettling. But it's also liberating.

That's what the practice is all about: to question the assumptions we have that make us suffer. And as part of the path, you replace them with other perceptions, some of which you learn from other people, such as the Buddha, and others of which you actually notice for yourself.

So you don't feel so compelled to keep on suffering. You start noticing what you're doing that's causing the suffering and you realize it's unnecessary, so you drop it. That's what it comes down to.

But you can't do this just in the abstract. You have to watch what's actually going on. And you have to apply these perceptions when you see that they're helpful, to help you question your old ways of doing things. And you can turn them into a new way of doing things. Instead of causing suffering, you can learn how to think in ways and perceive in ways that help lead to the end of suffering.

You're using the same tools, it's just that you're learning how to use them for different ends. You use your body, you use your feelings, you use your perceptions, your fabrications, your consciousness. You convert them into the path.

As Ajaan Lee once said, "A wise person can get good use out of anything." We're told that the aggregates, if you cling to them, are the essence of what's

stressful, the essence of suffering. So what the Buddha has you do is take these things that are the building blocks for suffering and put them together in a new way.

Which means that wisdom is not just knowing about things. It's the kind of knowledge that comes with skill, as you learn to manipulate your experience in a deft way.

So keep that in mind: We're here working on a skill. We're not going to obliterate anything. We're just taking what we've got and reconfiguring it. This mind that's often so obstreperous can become a mind of peace, a mind of concentration, a mind of wisdom. You're basically working with the same building blocks, just you learn how to use them in a new way.