

## *Looking in Three Directions*

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A couple of years back, there was an interview in a newspaper. A famous European pianist was taking a farewell tour in the States, and in the interview he was talking about what it was like to play the piano. He said you have to be aware of three things. The primary thing, of course, is what you're doing right now. But even before that, you had to plan. How do you want this phrase to go? How do you want the whole piece to go? How does this phrase fit into the piece?

So you anticipate where you're going; you're looking at what you're actually doing; and then you also have to reflect on what you just did. Did that phrasing fit into the concept you had? And you have to make adjustments all along the way. In other words, if you find yourself playing the piece in a particular way that you hadn't anticipated, the question is: Are you going to try to move your playing in the direction of where it's now going or where you had originally planned to go? Are you going to reconceive what you do with the piece as you go on? And if you are, how much are you going to put on your planning, and how much are you just going to go with what's happening right now?

Of course, part of the decision is based on what you've just done. How does it sound? If you allow the piece to go in this new direction, does it seem to be going in a good place, or have you made a big error? Or was the original plan a big error? These are all things you have to evaluate.

The same process is happening while you're meditating on the breath, especially as you're getting the mind to settle down. When you've got a plan here—you want the mind to settle down with the breath, and you want the breath to be comfortable—then you have to look at what you're actually doing. Where are you focused? How is the breath going right now? To what extent are you controlling the breath, and to what extent are you allowing the breath to do its own thing? And how is it going? Do you need to make changes? Do you need to make adjustments?

So in a sense, you're looking in three directions all at once: a little bit into the future, right at the present moment, and a little bit into the past. It's necessary that you do this to get the mind in the right trajectory.

Sometimes you'll find that your idea of where you wanted this to go is just not happening. Then the question is: Was there something wrong with the original idea? Or is there something wrong with what you're doing? What can you

change? Is the breath too long? Is it too short? Are you focused on the wrong space?

Are there other problems with the breath? Are you carrying issues from the day? Or are the issues from last week? Are they issues from the past year? Are they issues from your whole life? Are they getting in the way? And if they are, what can you do to knock them out for the time being? Some issues are small, and you can take care of them right away. Other issues may be more deeply ingrained, and what you need there is a simple karate chop. Knock them out for the rest of the hour so that at the very least you have some space to do the work of the meditation right here.

If you do it properly, you're developing concentration with a lot of mindfulness and with a lot of alertness at the same time. So even though it may seem there's a lot of busy-work—anticipating the future, looking at the present moment, and evaluating what you've just done—you're focused on one main topic, which is the breath. This is how you maintain mindfulness and alertness even as the mind gets quiet—because it is possible to slip off into a state of stillness where you're not really aware of what's happening, and that's not what you want.

So you have to anticipate that problem. As soon as the breath gets comfortable, you've got to expand your awareness, either going systematically through the body section by section, or if you've already done that today, see if you can just set the whole body on fire, like the mantle of a Coleman lantern. You put the match right near the mantle and—whoosh!—the whole thing turns white, bright, and dazzling.

Whether you need to work through breath energy problems in different parts of the body will depend on what you've been doing in the course of the day. If they've already been worked through, how can you expand everything right away? Explode the energy through the body, explode your awareness through the body, and then evaluate how it's going.

If you keep these three things in mind—what your plan is for the meditation, what you're actually doing, how well you're doing it and how well the results are going—this is how the meditation becomes a skill. You learn to recognize problems as they come up and you use your ingenuity to figure them out. You see if you can solve them.

So these are the three things you have to look at. One of them, the plan for the session, is really important. I don't know how many people I've run into who say, "Well, I'm going to do a little concentration, and when the mind gets still, then I'm going to switch over to do insight practice"—the assumption being that

you've got to leave concentration in order to do insight. But that's not the case. As you're working with the breath right here and the mind begins to settle down, you're developing insight on many levels. Simply the act of fending off distractions is an important source of insights right there.

In the beginning, the distractions are gross. You sit here, and the mind begins to settle down a little bit. And you suddenly realize the mind has some other agendas. Different members of the committee haven't agreed on what you're going to do for the hour. Some of them say, "Hey, now that there's free time, we can plan for tomorrow or hash over what happened today." And you have to develop the insight that enables you to say No to those things and to stick with the No.

Once the mind has settled down, and there's that temptation to say, "Okay, now we do our insight work," just stay still and see happens. What's going to come along to try to destroy your concentration? If you're aware of the breath energy in the body, you'll start getting quicker and quicker at seeing how a thought forms. That right there is a huge and important insight, because if you can't catch these things quickly, you're going to be aware of them only when they've totally taken over, and then it's really difficult to flush them out of the system.

But if you begin to see a little stirring here, a little energy knot there, breathe right through it as quickly as you can—as soon as you notice these things. When you do this, you begin to see that you catch the mind in earlier and earlier stages of thought formation, and you begin to recognize, "Okay, this is where it's simply a stirring that's hard to even classify as whether it's a mental or a physical stirring. This is the point where the mind identifies it as a mental stirring, and this is the point where I give it a meaning, as to whether this is a thought about the future, a thought about the past"—all these various stages in which the mind can get more and more entangled. You try to catch these things more and more quickly. And in seeing these different stages, you gain some insight into the process of how the mind creates a state of becoming: how it clings to things, how craving can motivate different perceptions. So simply in the act of protecting your meditation—watching over what you're doing and evaluating how things are going—you gain a lot of insights.

Sometimes we're programmed to say, "Well, it's not really insight until you see things as inconstant, stressful, and not-self." But there are lots of other insights you need, other perceptions you can apply. The Buddha gives a whole list: seeing something as a cancer, seeing it as alien, seeing it as empty, or seeing it as a dissolution. These are all different perceptions that you can apply to peel the mind

away from its attachments, or to peel the attachments off of it. And the fact that the insight that has liberated you from a particular thought doesn't fit into a classical term doesn't mean that it's not Dhamma. It doesn't mean that it's not insight. Whatever frees you from stress, whatever frees you from clinging and craving, is part of the path. And any insight that does that is an important part of your meditation.

So simply protecting your concentration is an important stage in insight. This is why the Buddha said there is no insight, no discernment without jhana. In other words, you don't make the mind still only for a brief moment and then switch over to insight practice in order to gain something to write home about or something you could put in your journal. You try to get the mind still, and you try to keep it there, evaluating it as you go along.

As you're evaluating it, remember: Your anticipation is that you're going to keep the mind still with the breath for the hour. Then you evaluate what you're doing. Are you actually doing this? What are the results? Is there a sense of ease? A sense of well-being? Is the mind energized enough to keep going, or are you clamping down on it in a way that makes the mind lose some of its energy? If it begins to feel that it's getting worn out, the concentration is out of balance. You've got to do something to energize the mind. Other times, it's moving around too much. You've got to get it to settle down.

When things are going well, you can let go of a lot of the evaluation. Simply keep note of the fact that you're going to stay here with this breath and try to fend off anything else that interferes. When the ease and well-being get really strong, your potential disturbances—the potential distractions—get less and less interesting. But there's always the potential there. This is why you have to be heedful. This is why you have to be watchful. And this is also how you maintain mindfulness, as you get the mind into deeper and deeper states of stillness.

In this way, even though you're focused primarily on the present, you're looking forward a little bit and looking backward a little bit: forward in the determination to be mindful and backward in your evaluation. This is why the Buddha says the active parts of the first jhana are directed thought, evaluation, and singleness of preoccupation. The directed thought anticipates the future a little bit; the evaluation checks the past a little bit; and the singleness of preoccupation is focused on the present.

If you have the right notion of what you want to do and develop your sensitivity in evaluating things, this is how the mind can settle down and not simply be still, but also be aware and alert, gaining insights as you maintain your stillness. So try to keep all of these dimensions of the concentration in play.