

## *Focus on What You're Doing*

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You probably notice that as soon as you focus on the breath, the chattering classes in your mind start in, commenting on the breath, commenting on how well things are going, or commenting on whether you should continue meditating. Some of the comments are useful; a lot of them are not.

An important part of the meditation is learning how to sort these things out: how to have a few rules of order for your inner conversation because, after all, you have to be in charge of your meditation. No one else can come in and straighten out your mind for you. This is a subtle problem because sometimes you picked up some good ideas and put them to the wrong use. Sometimes you're resistant to some good ideas.

You may listen to the same Dhamma talk many, many times, and only after a long while do you begin to hear some of the things that are being said in the talk. You slip over some of them. They're maybe not important, or they just don't fit in with your ideas of what's needed in the meditation.

This is where honesty is an important part of the practice—honesty in seeing what you're doing, honesty in seeing what results you're getting, and coming back again and again to that one big question: "Where is the stress?" The follow-up question is: "What is it coming from? And what can you do about it?" Notice, the Buddha always has you attack the problem at the cause. Stress is something to be comprehended. In other words, you watch what's happening. Where is the mind getting stressed out about something?

You can stress out about the world. You can actually stress out about the Dhamma. There was that time when Ven. Anuruddha complained to Ven. Sariputta that his meditation was going really well. In fact, he actually had the divine eye. He could see beings dying and being reborn. He could see what was going on in the different levels of heaven and hell. Yet, still he hadn't become an arahant. Something was still lacking in his meditation. Sariputta pointed to that concern: "I haven't got that far yet. I've got to push what's left to push." He said to Anuruddha, "That's your restlessness right there."

Sometimes you have some preconceived notions about how things should work, and you just push, push, push, push the mind the mind in that direction. And it doesn't work. As Ajaan Fuang once said, "If we could push our way into nibbana, we would have done it a long time ago. It's more subtle than that." You focus on the causes. And there are two kinds of causes. There are the causes for

suffering, and there's the path that leads to the end of suffering. The path doesn't cause release; it doesn't cause nibbana. But it takes you there.

Those are the two things you want to focus on. What are you doing that's causing stress? And what are you doing that's actually helping to alleviate it? You want to learn how to read your actions. This is why we fabricate a state of concentration: so that we can get good at fabricating a good state of mind and get more conscious of what it means to engage in fabrication.

We're always fabricating different mental states: greed, aversion, delusion—all kinds of things. We're doing it all the time, to the point we're not really conscious of what we're doing. So when we sit down to meditate, we want to be conscious of what we're doing with the mind right now. That way, you begin to see the steps in the process.

You'd like to create a good state of mind. You want to have the breath flowing nicely. What does that mean? People get all tied up in knots, reading about how the breath has to be this way or that way. They think they're actually going to be pumping air into their nerves. That's not the case. The breath energy is already there in the body. It's simply that in some places it's not flowing well, or that you've been breathing in a way that's laborious or unpleasant in the body. Part of that has to do with your perception of exactly what's happening when you breathe.

So one of the important parts of meditation is learning how to play with your perceptions. Think of the breath energy coming in and out of the pores. See what that's like. Think of it coming in at certain spots in the body where there's a trigger point—in other words, wherever there are some knots in your muscles. Think of the breath energy coming in right there, going through the knot. Or you can think of it coming in and out the palms of your hands, the soles of your feet. Play with these perceptions and see what happens. Play with each perception long enough to see what impact it's having.

When you're evaluating the breath, what standards do you use to evaluate what's good and what's not? A common mistake is to think that somehow by stopping the way you breathe or getting the mind dizzy—in other words, getting it in a very abnormal state—that's going to be a breakthrough to something really good. Well, no it's not. Awakening happens when the mind is perfectly balanced and things are perfectly normal. Everything feels just right.

So you've got to work on how to develop a sense of just right. It's like fixing food. Today you add this much salt, and then you taste it. Does it taste right? If not, tomorrow you change the amount of salt you put in. Adjust it up and down until you get a sense of what's too much and what's just right. It's the same with

the breath. What's too long? What's too short? In the beginning, you can try just posing the question in your mind: What would feel really comfortable right now? See how the body responds. Sometimes it'll respond, and sometimes it won't.

You might like the idea that you can just pose the question and the body will do all the work, but it doesn't always happen that way. Sometimes you've got to consciously change things, because the body can get into ruts. There can be some negative feedback loops in its breathing. So if you pose the question of what would feel really good right now and the body doesn't seem to be feeling especially good, then you've consciously got to work at it. Try shorter breathing, longer breathing, deeper, more shallow.

In this way, you work with all the different elements of what the Buddha calls fabrication: the breath, your directed thought and evaluation, your feelings and your perceptions. You get more sensitive to how you can adjust things to get things just right so that the mind is happy to stay here. It feels good being here right now. Things begin to gather together and settle down. Then you can take that knowledge and use it.

When things aren't going right, okay, what's the problem? When there's an element of stress in the mind, either from your worries about the world or your impatience to get some place in the practice and you want to push things through: step back. Ask yourself, where is the fabrication here? How's the breath? What are your perceptions? What are your feelings? What is the mind talking to itself about where it wants to go and what it's expecting? What questions is it asking itself?

If you've got an emotion that's pulling you away from the meditation, you use the same set of questions: How are you breathing? What are your perceptions about that particular issue that's got you pulled away? What's the feeling tone in the mind? What are the feeling tones in the body? What's the inner conversation you're having about that? What are the values you're expressing in that conversation?

In other words, when you get sensitive to these things in the meditation, you can learn to notice how you're fashioning problems in the mind as you go through life.

This is one of the ways in which you take the skills you develop on the cushion and learn how to use them in the thick of the battle. That way, when you're sitting here meditating, it's not simply the case that you sit here with your eyes closed, and everything just settles down—or that you simply wait for things to take their natural course. You've been creating all kinds of causes in the way you breathe and

the way you think that are going to take a while to run out unless you create some alternative causes.

So here, we're trying to create the alternative causes that get things settled in and give you the right perspective on being here right now so that things can begin to open up inside. Then you realize that when a particularly distracting thought comes up or an emotion comes up, it's made out of the same things. You're engaged in the same kinds of activities: breathing in particular ways, talking to yourself in particular ways, and holding particular perceptions in mind.

You can ask yourself how much longer you want to torment yourself with these things. How about changing them? You've got the possibility of changing them. It's totally up to you. No one's forcing you. But if it so happens that you change the way you perceive things and that takes a huge burden off the mind, why not? Learn to turn around and look at what you're doing. That's where you see the stress, and you see the cause of the stress in a way that allows you to let go of it.

That's when you realize that the skills you develop as a meditator really are useful, because they teach you to watch yourself in action and to stop weighing yourself down with unnecessary suffering and stress.