

Motivation

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We tend to think of Buddhist wisdom as something very refined. And there are a lot of refined aspects to it. But the basic principles are all very down-to-earth.

One of the first exercises of your discernment when you meditate is how to get yourself to meditate when you don't feel like it—or how to get yourself to meditate when a lot of other things are pulling you in their direction.

As the Buddha said, this is one of the measures of your discernment and wisdom.

One of the reasons we work with the breath is to give you an inducement, a reason to want to meditate. If the meditation is dry, then you're going to look for your moisture someplace else. You're going to look for your flavor someplace else. But if the meditation can be interesting—in the sense of giving rise to a sense of well-being in the body—then you're more likely to want to come back and do it again.

So breathe deeply. Try to breathe in a way that feels really nourishing right now. This is good for you not only right now but also into the future. It's good fodder, when you leave meditation, for thinking about why you want to come back.

That's the carrot. But sometimes you need to use the stick.

The stick is that contemplation we had just now, "We're subject to aging, subject to illness, subject to death." Where are you going to look for happiness when you're subject to those things? How are you going to spend your time profitably?

As the Buddha says, most of us spend our time gathering flowers as death comes our way. Well, death is going to take us and the flowers and send us different directions. All the things we gather up are going to be scattered. What will we have to hold on to?

Thinking in this way gives rise to heedfulness. As the Buddha said, heedfulness is *the* basic motivation for all good things we do, all the skillful actions we do whether in thought, word, or deed. We realize that if we act in unskillful ways, there's going to be suffering down the line. Our actions really do make a difference. If our actions didn't make a difference, heedfulness wouldn't be a really worthwhile attitude to have. Regardless of what you did, it wouldn't have any effect on anything so it wouldn't matter what you do. But that's not the case. What you do, say, and think really does shape your life.

And these actions: Where do they come from? They come from your mind. If your mind is in really bad shape, what kind of actions is it going to make?

So you want your mind to be solid, you want it to be secure, you want it to be strong.

If there are times when the pressures of your daily life say, “You have to do this first. You have to do that first,” you can say, “Wait a minute. Whatever I do, I want to do it with a good state of mind.” You have to have arguments to use against your defilements. You have to be able to put things into perspective. And that’s one argument right there: That whatever you want to do or whatever you have to do, you want to do it with a state of mind that’s solid, secure. And where are you going to get that state of mind unless you meditate?

As for the voices that say, “But you’ve got to do this chore first and take care of that issue first,” say, “No, I can do those things later.” You have to make a distinction between what’s pressing and what’s important. Sometimes things are pressing but you have to press back.

Say, “Give me some space, give me some time. I’ve got to work on my mind first. Because if my mind is all strung out, then the things I do and say and think are things I’m going to have to come back and undo or redo. So why not wait until I’m in a position to do them right in the first place?”

That’s heedfulness. That’s one of the ways you can motivate yourself.

As the Buddha said, the ability, as he says, “to give rise to the desire to abandon unskillful qualities and give rise to the desire to develop skillful qualities” is an important part of the meditation. It’s not just the technique. It’s not just the state of a nice still mind that we’re after. If that were the case, we could all go out and buy those theta-wave machines, hook ourselves up, and just get a nice buzz. But meditation is not about the buzz. It’s about understanding your own mind.

You come to understand your mind by dealing with its defilements. When the mind gets obstreperous, you know how to bring it back down. When it starts telling you crazy things, you know how to argue with it. These are important skills in the meditation.

Ajaan Maha Boowa once reported that people kept asking him, what’s an easy way to overcome laziness? And he said, just asking the question is a lazy question. If you answer it, you’re promoting more laziness. Sometimes overcoming laziness will have to be hard. You have to learn how to deal with the hard things and learn how to talk yourself into being willing to make the effort when you least feel like it.

When you do that, though, you’ve learned a lot about your own mind. You keep coming up against resistance and then you learn how to overcome the

resistance. If you try to get around the resistance by looking for an easy way out, you've fallen prey to the resistance. So you've got to buck against it. You've got to push against it.

Or learn how to avoid it. The mind will come up with some issues and you just learn how to step to one side. In doing that, you've learned a lot of interesting things about the mind.

When you develop wisdom and discernment in the Buddha's practice, it's not simply a matter of seeing, "Oh, this is inconstant, stressful, and not-self." You also have to see, "The mind creates these issues. Which are the issues that are really worth paying attention to and which are the ones you have to put aside?" That's a huge part of the Buddha's teachings on discernment and wisdom.

You probably know the story of the man shot by the arrow. There was a monk who once came to see the Buddha and demanded the answers to some questions about the nature of the cosmos out there: "Did it have a starting point in time? Or is it eternal? Is it infinite? Is it not infinite? Is there an edge to space? Is there no edge to space? And how about human beings? Are we just physical things and is our consciousness a byproduct of our physical processes? Or is there something else separate?" Questions like that.

And the Buddha said, "I'm not providing an answer to them. I've never answered those questions." The monk threatened to disrobe if he didn't get the answers. And the Buddha replied, "Go ahead and disrobe if you want but I've never made a promise that if you ordained, I'd answer these questions." That was because those questions are distractions. They actually get in the way.

Those may not be the questions or the issues that your mind raises at any time, but each of us has a lot of issues that pull us off to the side, pull us off track.

So the Buddha's image to explain his refusal to answer the questions is a good one to remember. He said it's like a man who's been shot by an arrow. He goes to the doctor, and the doctor's getting ready to remove the arrow, but the man says, "Wait a minute. Before you remove the arrow, I have to know who shot the arrow and what kind of wood it was made from and what kind of feathers," and the whole process. The man would die.

So you have to remind yourself: You've been shot by an arrow. You've got this suffering in the mind. And it's not just one arrow. We shoot ourselves with many arrows. So you have to do what can be done to pull the arrows out.

Here again, that's a way of thinking based on heedfulness. There's a problem and it has to be solved. If it's not solved, it just creates more and more problems. So focus on giving it top priority.

Or you can think of the meditation as a gift, not only to yourself but to the

people around you. When you come out of meditation, you're in a much better mood. As Ajaan Lee says, when the meditation is going well, they can curse your mother and you won't get angry. Even though you may not be able to uproot all your greed, aversion, and delusion, the fact that they're lighter, less forceful, means that the people around you are going to be less victimized by them.

So if the mind says, "You're being selfish, just looking after yourself," you can reply that looking after your mind is not a selfish activity. The goodness that comes from meditation is goodness that spreads around.

This is true of all the activities that the Buddha said are meritorious. When you're generous, you benefit, the people around you benefit. When you observe the precepts, you benefit, the people around you benefit. When you meditate, the people around you benefit in addition to your benefiting.

So learn how to argue with those voices that say, "I don't have time. Other things are more important. I'm being selfish." Don't believe them. If you know that you're prey to a particular way of thinking that gets in the way of the meditation, sit down and write out some answers. Use your ingenuity.

Give rise to that desire that you want to meditate every day, every day, every day, even if it means giving up a few activities that you like. This is a sign of your wisdom: learning how to say No to things that you may like but in the long term are not going to be that beneficial, and learning how to say Yes to the things that you find difficult but you know are going to be helpful in the long-term.

So don't think the meditation as simply the process of sitting here with your eyes closed focused on the breath. Part of the process is also talking yourself into sitting down here, especially when the mind is veering off in another direction. Everything you can do that can get you here, training the mind, is part of the training.

Other people can give you ideas, but you're the one who has to figure out your own mind to see: What is it about the mind that resists? Or what is it about the mind that gets so easily distracted? Then come up with your own ways of keeping yourself on course.

This is how wisdom is developed, through basic things like this. And it's only when the basic things are really solid that the more refined ones can really do their work, because they grow out of these kinds of questions: "What's important? What's not important?" That's a big question right there. "What's worthy of attention, what's not?" Those are questions that are going to keep you engaged all the way through the meditation.

So start working on the basic issues because they give you the training you need.