

## *Learning by Doing*

*April 4, 2014*

We learn by doing.

You look at the Buddha's life. What did he learn from? He had a couple of teachers. But when he put into practice what they taught, he wasn't satisfied with the results. Even though they guaranteed that, Yes, he had received the results they were talking about, still they weren't good enough for him. He wanted something better.

So from that point on he had to learn from his own actions: noticing when he was getting the results he wanted and, if he wasn't, he'd ask himself, "What can I change?"

It was through that process of acting and examining and then changing his actions as he found necessary: That's how he achieved awakening.

So right now we're following his example. We're doing the concentration to learn from the concentration. At least we have the example of his teachings, the examples of the great teachers who followed his teachings, so we're not totally in the dark.

But still there's a lot we don't understand because the Buddha wasn't just talking about words. He was talking about what can be learned from mastering a skill. And the skill here is learning how to stay with one object consistently.

We choose the breath because it's convenient. You don't have to buy anything, you don't have to ask for any secret passwords. It's right there coming in, going out all the time. It's the closest thing there is to your awareness. It's what keeps your body and mind together. And it's one of the few processes of the body that you can actually adjust. So you can make it comfortable to make it easier to stay here.

We're practicing both mindfulness and concentration together. Mindfulness is keeping something in mind. You're going to keep the breath in mind right now. And then you're alert to watch the breath.

Then you bring the quality of ardency, which means you want to do it right, you want to do it well. That's a factor that's missing from most people's meditation. Sometimes they're told to just watch whatever comes and whatever goes and try to not to do anything. But you're not going to learn anything that way. You learn by doing something and then gauging the results of what you've done, deciding whether it's good enough. Then you learn more by making yourself more alert, more mindful so that you become a more reliable judge of what's good enough.

So we learn from the concentration, we learn from the ardency that goes into this.

Of those three qualities that the Buddha recommends for mindfulness practice, and which also slough over into concentration practice—the mindfulness, alertness and ardency—ardency is the wisdom factor. That's a fact that's often overlooked.

It requires wisdom to motivate yourself to do this to begin with. There are lots of voices in

the mind that would rather be doing something else right now. You have to learn how to argue with them—and have good reasons to show for why you would want to stay with your breath coming in, going out right now.

Then there's the wisdom or the discernment that you develop as you stay with the breath, figuring out which ways of breathing are good, which ways are not. Which places to focus in the body are easy to stay with and which ones are not.

If there's an imbalance in the body—too much pressure, say, in the head—how do you bring your attention down so that you're not making the pressure in the head worse?

Don't think that you have to focus only at the nose. You can focus anywhere in the body where there's a feeling of energy. The energy may be moving, it may be still: That doesn't matter. Just keep in mind that there's a kind of energy there. Even in your hands, your feet as you're sitting here very still: There's still an energy. The blood is flowing through the veins. Impulses are going through the nerves. Just stay with that felt sense of what it's like to inhabit your body right here.

If you're not getting good results, ask yourself, "Is the problem with the mind? Are you bringing the wrong attitudes right now? What can you do to cut through them in as quick and effective a way as you can imagine so that you can settle down and just be with the breath?"

Or is the problem with the breath or the body? If there are pains in parts of the body, you don't have to focus on them. Try to focus on the parts of the body that are comfortable.

Then, as the mind begins to settle down, how do you keep it there? One common problem is once you've been with the breath for a bit you say, "Okay, that's enough. What's next?" Well what's next should be more breaths. And you have to learn how to not fall for that particular thought that wants to know what's next and wants to go someplace else, wants to step on the concentration to get someplace that it thinks is higher.

You've got to have respect for concentration. You're ardent in doing it and you have to have respect for it, like the verse says. You're going to be learning from the fact that you're doing the concentration. And just as you learn best from people to whom you show respect, you'll learn from the breath when you show it respect.

We're not here to meld into the infinite or see the Oneness of everything or the interconnectedness of everything. Those things are all beside the point.

When the Buddha was learning from his actions, he realized that questions like, "Are we all One? Are we all interconnected?" are useless actions, so you put them aside. You focus on: "What I am doing right now? And is it causing stress or is it helping alleviate stress?" Those are the questions that go with the four noble truths.

And those are the questions of discernment. They help refine your stages of concentration and also help you to see into what the mind is doing. Because after all, what you've got in the concentration is everything you need to know. All the different forms of fabrication, all the different aggregates: They're right here.

You've got the form of the body, you've got the feelings of pleasure or pain or neither-pleasure-nor-pain. Hopefully you can work with the breath so that you can give rise to a greater sense of pleasure. Then there are the perceptions that hold you here: how you visualize the breath to yourself, what image you hold in mind. The fabrications that ask questions and make observations. And then your awareness of all these things.

All the aggregates are right here. Everything you need to know and understand is right here. These are all activities that you're doing right now, so you're going to have to learn from what you're doing.

It might not be as grandiose as infinity or interconnectedness or Oneness or anything, but it's actually effective to learn from your actions like this: where you learn to peel away layers of ignorance in your mind about what you're doing and the results you're getting from what you're doing.

So have some respect for the concentration. Everything you need to know is right here. You're doing things that you're going to be learning from. And try to protect the concentration as much as you can as you go through the day.

We've got a lot of people here right now, which means that we have to be especially careful both of our own concentration and of other people's concentration.

That phrase "respect for concentration" applies not only to your own practice. All too often we bring attitudes from the outside world in: that to show that you're friendly you have to chat people up. Well, this is not a chatting place. This is a place where people should be respecting concentration, giving one another the gift of silence. We show our friendliness by being helpful, lightening other people's loads, speaking when necessary, and giving everybody else space to be quiet when it's not necessary to speak.

So watch what you're doing, watch what you're saying, watch what your mind is thinking. Because it's from your actions, from your karma, that you learn. That was how the Buddha learned, and he wants us to follow his example: looking basically in the same place where he looked—right here at the breath where your mind and the body meet.

That way, whatever things happen in the body and whatever things happen in the mind that are connected with one another, you see the connection. You see the element of intention that goes into this. The ardency with which you practice is what makes all the difference between gaining insight and just going through the motions.

It's like any skill like cooking or carpentry or sport. You get better because you notice what you're doing. Then you figure out ways to do it better. Your sensitivity gets heightened. Your standards get heightened. What seems to be working for a while: You begin to realize that it's really not good enough. You want something better.

So you go back and look again. What are you doing that's unnecessary? Where's the unnecessary stress that you're creating? What can you do to stop the cause of that stress?

This way, you become a better and better craftsman of your meditation.

So show some respect for the concentration. Be ardent doing it, maintaining it. When you really respect your concentration, it makes it easier to show respect for other people's too. Then if you're respecting theirs, what are you going to do? You don't have all that chitchat going on.

You turn back and look at your own mind. If you have to talk about something to yourself, talk about the breath, talk about your mind staying with the breath. Ask questions. Learn how to frame the questions properly so that they keep you coming back to what you're doing, and what might you be doing better.

The concentration is your laboratory. It's also your nourishment, it's what keeps you going. Looking at your actions, if you don't get a sense of well-being, gets really tiresome. So learn to breathe in a way that feels really good. And remind yourself that you can have that nourishment anytime you want. So why not just keep at it and have some now?

This is how the concentration leads to wisdom and insight: by allowing you to see what you're doing clearly and to refine your actions until you reach the utmost level of refinement—and then you go beyond action. But the only way you're going to go beyond it is by learning how to refine it.

So have some respect for what you're doing right here. And show some ardency in doing it well.